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The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series

THE WENTE FAMILY AND THE CALIFORNIA WINE INDUSTRY

Interviews with
Jean Wente
Carolyn Wente
Philip Wente
Eric Wente

With an Introduction by
Maynard A. Amerine

Interviews Conducted by
Ruth Teiser
in 1991

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Eric, Jean, Philip, and Carolyn Wente, 1983

Photograph by Ruth Teiser and Catherine Harroun

Cataloging Information

THE WENTE FAMILY AND THE CALIFORNIA WINE INDUSTRY, 1992, xiii, 159 pp.

Jean Wente (b. 1926) on the Wente family in the Central Valley since 1926, Wente Bros. winery, 1950s to present, improvements, expansion to Monterey County. Carolyn Wente (b. 1955) discusses marketing at Wente Bros. since 1980, creating a restaurant, champagne. Philip Wente (b. 1952) recalls employees, working for Wente Bros. since 1974, becoming executive vice president in 1977, phylloxera and other vineyard problems. Eric Wente (b. 1951) on work at Wente Bros. since 1974, president since 1977, exports, expansion.

Introduction by Maynard Amerine, Professor Emeritus, Department of Viticulture and Enology, University of California, Davis.

Interviewed in 1991 by Ruth Teiser for the Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series, The Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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PREFACE

The California wine industry oral history series, a project of the Regional Oral History Office, was initiated in 1969 through the action and with the financing of the Wine Advisory Board, a state marketing order organization which ceased operation in 1975. In 1983 it was reinstituted as The Wine Spectator California Winemen Oral History Series with donations from The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation. The selection of those to be interviewed is made by a committee consisting of the director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; John A. De Luca, president of the Wine Institute, the statewide winery organization; Maynard A. Amerine, Emeritus Professor of Viticulture and Enology, University of California, Davis; the current chairman of the board of directors of the Wine Institute; Ruth Teiser, series project director; and Marvin R. Shanken, trustee of The Wine Spectator Scholarship Foundation.

The purpose of the series is to record and preserve information on California grape growing and winemaking that has existed only in the memories of wine men. In some cases their recollections go back to the early years of this century, before Prohibition. These recollections are of particular value because the Prohibition period saw the disruption of not only the industry itself but also the orderly recording and preservation of records of its activities. Little has been written about the industry from late in the last century until Repeal. There is a real paucity of information on the Prohibition years (1920-1933), although some commercial winemaking did continue under supervision of the Prohibition Department. The material in this series on that period, as well as the discussion of the remarkable development of the wine industry in subsequent years (as yet treated analytically in few writings) will be of aid to historians. Of particular value is the fact that frequently several individuals have discussed the same subjects and events or expressed opinions on the same ideas, each from his own point of view.

Research underlying the interviews has been conducted principally in the University libraries at Berkeley and Davis, the California State Library, and in the library of the Wine Institute, which has made its collection of in many cases unique materials readily available for the purpose.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of The Bancroft Library.

Ruth Teiser
Project Director
The Wine Spectator California Winemen
Oral History Series

July 1992
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University of California, Berkeley

CALIFORNIA WINE INDUSTRY INTERVIEWS
Interviews Completed July 1992

Leon D. Adams, Revitalizing the California Wine Industry, 1974

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Philo Biane, Wine Making in Southern California and Recollections of Fruit Industries, Inc., 1972

John B. Cella, The Cella Family in the California Wine Industry, 1986

Charles Crawford, Recollections of a Career with the Gallo Winery and the Development of the California Wine Industry, 1942-1989, 1990

Burke H. Critchfield, Carl F. Wente, and Andrew G. Frericks, The California Wine Industry During the Depression, 1972

William V. Cruess, A Half Century of Food and Wine Technology, 1967

Jack and Jamie Peterman Davies, Rebuilding Schramsberg: The Creation of a California Champagne House, 1990

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Making California Port Wine: Ficklin Vineyards from 1948 to 1992, interviews with David, Jean, Peter, and Steven Ficklin, 1992

Alfred Fromm, Marketing California Wine and Brandy, 1984

Louis Gomberg, Analytical Perspectives on the California Wine Industry, 1935-1990, 1990

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Joseph E. Heitz, Creating a Winery in the Napa Valley, 1986

Maynard A. Joslyn, A Technologist Views the California Wine Industry, 1974

Amandus N. Kasimatis, A Career in California Viticulture, 1988

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Legh F. Knowles, Jr., Beaulieu Vineyards from Family to Corporate Ownership, 1990

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Richard Maher, California Winery Management and Marketing, 1992

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Michael Moone, Management and Marketing at Beringer Vineyards and Wine World, Inc., 1990

Myron S. Nightingale, Making Wine in California, 1944-1987, 1988

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Louis A. Petri, The Petri Family in the Wine Industry, 1971

Jefferson E. Peyser, The Law and the California Wine Industry, 1974

Lucius Powers, The Fresno Area and the California Wine Industry, 1974

Victor Repetto and Sydney J. Block, Perspectives on California Wines, 1976

Edmund A. Rossi, Italian Swiss Colony and the Wine Industry, 1971

Edmund A. Rossi, Jr., Italian Swiss Colony, 1949-1989: Recollections of a Third-Generation California Winemaker, 1990

Arpaxat Setrakian, A. Setrakian, a Leader of the San Joaquin Valley Grape Industry, 1977

Elie Skofis, California Wine and Brandy Maker, 1988

Andre Tchelistcheff, Grapes, Wine, and Ecology, 1983

Brother Timothy, The Christian Brothers as Wine Makers, 1974

Louis (Bob) Trinchero, California Zinfandels, a Success Story, 1992

The Wente Family and the California Wine Industry, interviews with Jean, Carolyn, Philip, and Eric Wente, 1992.

Ernest A. Wente, Wine Making in the Livermore Valley, 1971

Albert J. Winkler, Viticultural Research at UC Davis (1921-1971), 1973

John H. Wright, Domaine Chandon: The First French-owned California Sparkling Wine Cellar, includes an interview with Edmond Maudière, 1992

INTRODUCTION--by Maynard A. Amerine

These four interviews with Jean Wente and her three children, Carolyn, Eric, and Philip, carry forward the earlier interview with Ernest Wente, their father-in-law and grandfather.

The Wente family settled in the Livermore Valley in 1883. They were farmers and ranchers with an interest in vineyards and wines, and they remain so to this day. Their ties to the Livermore Valley and to the city of Livermore have been strong throughout this period.

These interviews start with Jean, who includes her account of the direction of the company by her husband, Karl, from 1961 until his untimely death in 1977. This was a period when grape varieties and clones were receiving great attention from the California wine industry, and the Wentes were very prominent in selecting new and better clones, even setting up a special certified nursery to secure the best clones for planting. At the same time, the winery facilities were being upgraded and expanded. This was a continuous process in which all of the Wentes participated. The result was that by the 1980s the Wente white table wines were recognized as representing one of the more consistent of the white table wines of California, and not only consistent but of high quality.

As these interviews amply show, the Wente tradition of management continues. As owners, managers, and employers, they represent high standards thoughtfully applied to the needs of their winery. I remember Herman and Ernest Wente and their close relationship with their employees before and after World War II. It appears that the present generation continues the Wente tradition. It is obvious that the family is involved in the major management decisions.

One recent development was the decision to produce sparkling wines. They have been consistent producers of these wines in their initial period. Another new area has been in the export market. Here they have been and are participating extensively. They have also done some import business in wines. The restaurant, too, has been a major project of all four of the Wentes. Recently they have also been active in land development in the Livermore Valley.

Finally, they have been great supporters of the Livermore Valley as a quality wine-producing region. This continues. Altogether, it is a record of which the Wente family can be proud. And the California wine industry can be thankful to have a family who are so generous with their cooperation in being good members of that industry.

Maynard A. Amerine
Professor Emeritus, Department of Viticulture and Enology, University of California, Davis

June 1992
St. Helena, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY--Wente Bros.

These interviews with the four members of the Wente family who head the family winery and vineyards were conducted in 1991. They continue Ernest A. Wente's 1969 account, Wine Making in the Livermore Valley (Regional Oral History Office, University of California, Berkeley, 1971). The recollections of Ernest Wente, a son of the 1883 founder of the winery, reached back to before the beginning of the century and came up to its operations under his son, Karl L. Wente, who headed it from 1961 until his untimely death in 1977. Since we had not interviewed Karl, we asked his widow, Jean R. Wente, to recall his career in this account. Following his death, she had become chairman of the board of Wente Bros., and her sons, Eric and Philip, had become president and vice president respectively. In 1980 her daughter, Carolyn, joined the organization as vice president in charge of marketing and public relations. Thus the interviews reflect the activities and viewpoints of four active leaders, three of whom are devoting their careers energetically to the family enterprise.

Many multiple-account interviews reflect differing points of view. These instead reflect a cohesiveness that is undoubtedly one key to a smoothly functioning family business. It is a business that, under the leadership of the great grandchildren of the first of the Livermore Valley Wentes, is in a period of thoughtfully conceived growth, strengthened internally and, in 1991, expanded through joint enterprises and acquisitions.

The interviewer, who had long been acquainted with the family and its activities, wishes to thank all four members for their characteristically gracious cooperation in this group of accounts.

Ruth Teiser
Interviewer/Editor

July 1992
Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

JEAN R. WENTE

Jean Robinson Wente became a member of the winemaking family in 1949 when she married Karl L. Wente, who in 1961 succeeded his father, Ernest Wente, as head of the Livermore Valley and Monterey County winegrowing enterprise. Between the time of her marriage and 1977, when Karl Wente died, she discussed with him informally the affairs of Wente Bros. Thus she was in a position to transmit to their children knowledge of the family business practices and traditions. As chairman of the board, she advises them while encouraging their independent decisions.

On the basis of an outline of suggested subjects for discussion that was sent to her in advance, she made notes to which she referred as she spoke. The interview was held in her office at the sparkling wine cellars and restaurant complex.

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Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Eugenia (Jean) Robinson Wente

Date of birth February 1, 1926 Birthplace Hanford, CA

Father's full name Louis Turner Robinson

Occupation Farm management Birthplace Greensboro, Georgia

Mother's full name Sara Newsom Robinson

Occupation housewife Birthplace Union Point, Georgia

Your spouse Karl Laird Wente

Your children Eric Peter Wente, Philip Robinson Wente, Carolyn Went

Where did you grow up? Corcoran, CA

Present community Livermore, CA

Education Corcoran school system, Stanford University

Occupation(s) Corporate officer of Wente Bros.Inc.

Areas of expertise knowledge of family business

Other interests or activities golf, tennis, travel (see attached list for community activities)

Organizations in which you are active see list

Jean Wente, circa 1985

INTERVIEW WITH JEAN R. WENTE

FAMILY AND EARLY YEARS, 1926-1949

[Date of Interview: April 11, 1991]##[1]

Teiser: Let me begin by asking when and where you were born.

Jean Wente: I was born in the San Joaquin Valley in 1926. Actually, the hospital was in Hanford, but my parents lived in Corcoran.

Teiser: Were they agriculturalists?

J. Wente: Yes, my father, Louis T. Robinson, was a cotton farmer. He came from Georgia and was very instrumental in putting together the J. G. Boswell Company, which are large corporate farmers. J. G. Boswell was also from Georgia, from the same area my father was, and when he was getting into his farming operation in the San Joaquin [Valley], down around the Tulare Lake basin, he asked my father if he'd come out from Georgia. My father said he'd be very interested. Of course, times were tough in Georgia. This was 1926, I guess; I'm a native Californian, so they came out in 1925.

Their whole idea was that they'd stay a few years and see how it went, and so forth and so on, and of course they never went back--and they never lost their little, soft southern accents, either. [laughter]

Teiser: So you grew up--

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[1]This symbol (##) indicates that a tape or portion of a tape has begun or ended. For a guide to the tapes, see page 152.

J. Wente: I grew up in a small farming community in the San Joaquin Valley.

Teiser: And you came to Stanford?

J. Wente: I came to Stanford. Actually, I think there were like thirty-two or thirty-four in my graduating senior class, and when I was at Stanford there were five kids at Stanford from that local high school. I think it speaks well for the quality of the education that little school was carrying out.

Teiser: What was the name of the school?

J. Wente: Corcoran Unified School District.

Teiser: Yes, it must have given you a good background. Do I remember that you were a history major at Stanford?

J. Wente: Yes, I was. That's marvelous; how did you remember that?

Teiser: I've asked you about yourself before, you know, in connection with articles I've written.

You met Karl at Stanford? At Dinah's, as I remember.

J. Wente: That's right. Actually, he picked me up in a bar. This is the story we always tell the kids: "Your father picked me up in a bar." [laughter]

Teiser: You married him, then, in '49?

J. Wente: Yes, in November of '49.

Teiser: Did you come here to live?

J. Wente: Yes. You've been over to the [Louis] Mel winery--the Mel house--haven't you?

Teiser: Yes.

J. Wente: Well, the Mel house was my honeymoon cottage. Karl and I worked on the Mel house, painting and papering, putting in a bathroom or two, and all kinds of things, from maybe mid-August through November 5, when we were married. We had it together enough that we could move in, and then we went right on working on it. That was our first home.

Teiser: Went on working on it in the vintage season, then?

J. Wente: No. Things come to a screeching halt during vintage season. We laughed about that, because the reason for November 5 as the wedding date was when the harvest was going to be finished that year--whether it would be early, late, or so forth. November 5 seemed like a safe date for the harvest being over.

HERMAN WENTE

Teiser: I was about to ask you about your first activities after your marriage, but maybe I should go back to your recollections of Herman Wente and Ernest Wente. I never met Herman. What was he like?

J. Wente: Herman was absolutely a charmer; everybody liked Herman. He was gregarious, outgoing, extremely bright. He was just that type of personality. He was the original p.r. man, but I'd say a subtle p.r. man, in that he was so genuinely wrapped up in the wine business--winemaking, wine and food, and so forth--that it never came across as p.r. He was just an ambassador at large for Wente wine, and California wine as far as that goes.

Teiser: Old-timers speak of him with very great regard.

J. Wente: I think one of the things that Carolyn [Wente] pointed out was that all this business now of wine and food--balancing wine with food and so on--Herman would be laughing at us, because he did that constantly. He was very aware of flavors with flavors and so forth. I can remember people calling Herman and saying, "We're having a big affair, and if I sent you the menu, Herman, could you possibly match wines for me?" Or, "Would you send me wines?" or "Tell me what I should be doing." He was good at it, he liked it; he had a marvelous palate.

I think there are people in this world who have what I call a computer palate in their head for remembering flavors and tastes. Herman was one of these people who could describe a wine he'd had fifteen years previously and talk to you about it. I think that's a real talent, and I think there are people in the wine industry who can do that, who have that kind of memory bank.

Herman and Edith [Mrs. Herman Wente] entertained quite a bit--not quite a bit; they entertained almost constantly. Herman really enjoyed that. I always looked forward to being included, because the guests were always fascinating, good conversation, good food.

Teiser: Were they other wine people or just people in general?

J. Wente: A wide variety. Usually some other wine people and then wine buffs.

When I said Herman was sort of our first p.r. person, he was on a first-name basis with the original editor of Gourmet, for example. Bobbie [Robert] Balzer always said that Herman straightened him out and set him on the right road for having a wine palate and learning about wine. I can think of some others. Herman just knew people who were interested in wine and food and so forth. André Simon, the person who was head of London Wine and Food Society [The Wine and Food Society, London] for so long (which is now the International Wine and Food Society), and Herman corresponded. He was just on that level in the wine and food industry at that time.

Herman had a marvelous collection of menus from restaurants around the country and wine lists. He not only had a memory bank for but a file for maitre d's and waiters. He just did all that very automatically. I must say, that was at a time when a waiter and a maitre d' stayed a few years at a restaurant. I don't think that's true today.

On top of all that, I think his basic thrust was that he was fantastically interested in wine quality; that was his shove all the way--improving the quality of wine, improving the techniques. When I first became a Wente, we sent all of our lab work down to a lab in Berkeley. Herman could see that this was becoming more and more difficult and that he needed more instant results; the time involved in sending the samples and receiving the information took too long as the winery became more technology conscious. He was instrumental in realizing that we needed to have an in-house lab. That was just getting underway. He had a young man coming down from [University of California at] Davis on the weekends who was working on his Ph.D. He came on the weekends and worked in the lab with Herman and started this. I guess this was after Karl was back.

I think Herman could see that the wine world was changing and needed to change. I think about Herman being the original boutique man. He had a vision for California wine that there needed to be more premium wineries in order to make California

wine a viable industry. He really encouraged people getting into the wine business, such as the McCraes [Eleanor and Fred] with Stony Hill [Vineyard] and the Stewarts [J. Leland and Glenzella] at [Chateau] Souverain and Mary and Jack Taylor at Mayacamas [Vineyards]. I know he was very friendly and did a lot of wine conversation with the Bartholomews [Frank H. and Antonia] at Buena Vista. Of course, one of our favorites was Jim Howe, who was with United Press. He was a real wine buff. He had been on the China beat back in the thirties, so to speak, and that sort of thing. He and Herman were good friends then. Jim had a little home winery that he called Gopher Gulch, because he said the gophers got as many grapes as he did.

Herman really had a plan for the California wine industry, I think you might say. Well, evidenced by the fact that he was very instrumental in the Wine Institute as we know it today. I know one of his really driving forces was to get some kind of industry group together that could work together.

Teiser: Leon Adams gives him great credit for strengthening the wine industry early on.

J. Wente: He was very interested in what was going on at Davis and was encouraging the viticulture department, first at UC [University of California at Berkeley], of course. Herman went to Berkeley. They had a very small enology and viticulture department there, and I gather he dabbled in that while he was there. Then it moved to UC Davis.

Teiser: Did he work with Dr. [William V.] Cruess?

J. Wente: I don't know if he worked with Dr. Cruess or someone with a very Italian name like Bonicelli or Bolinelli.

Teiser: Probably Frederic T. Bioletti.

J. Wente: This is where you need Ernest. [laughs]

ERNEST WENTE

Teiser: As you remember, we did do a very fine interview with Herman's brother, Ernest. How would you compare them?

J. Wente: Sort of night and day. It's amazing--well, it's not amazing, because I look at Eric and Phil. Ernest was very much into the farming part of it, really adored being the outdoor, manual, hard-labor farmer, and Herman was just the other way around. Cecil [Aguirre] said that one way to distinguish them is that Ernest came to work in work boots and khakis and a Pendleton shirt, and Herman came to work in a suit and tie. [laughter] That was non-grape season, however.

Teiser: I remember that I had an appointment with Ernest for an interview, and I got here and he wasn't here. It turned out he was out fixing a pump. It was first things first.

J. Wente: That's typical. Herman certainly was the winemaker. Herman worked in the winery and worked hard. Of course, when Herman and Ernest were doing this, we're talking pre-current technology--automatic refrigeration, for example--and lot of hands-on physical labor. When I think about California wine now, it's hard to find a bad California wine. I think you'd really have to look. The technology is such now that if you're making a bad wine, it's up here [indicates the mind], not because the knowledge isn't there; it's something you're doing. As opposed to when they were doing it right after Prohibition. None of the ease of technology was with them; it was the experience that was with them.

I think it's something that they both passed along to Karl, because Herman and Ernest both were very innovative and creative about the things they were doing and starting, Herman about his winery and Ernest about his farming, when Karl came along.

KARL L. WENTE

Youth and Education 1927-1949

Teiser: Karl really knew both enology and viticulture, then, didn't he?

J. Wente: Actually, there was a bit of rivalry going on there, whether Karl would be wine (enology) oriented or viticulture oriented. Of course, he wound up doing both, and doing both very easily, I think.

Teiser: What do you know about Karl as a young person before you met him?

J. Wente: I would gather just from listening, really, that Karl was absolutely the apple of everybody's eye. He was the first grandson. Hilma [Mrs. Edwin E. Hagemann] is so much younger than Ernest that her two children--Karl was maybe five or six before there were any more grandchildren. Here were all these older Wentes and Karl, so you can sort of envision the family light shining on him. It's amazing to me that he wasn't a completely spoiled brat. Or maybe he was for a while, and one eventually either outgrows that or not. But he really was the center of that family, there's no doubt about it, from his grandparents through all the aunts and uncles and so forth.

Karl had a very marvelous childhood in that father was home for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; work was immediately there. Karl grew up on the ranch and in the winery. It was a very loving but in a way very strict upbringing. He went to work at all the little chores and so forth, and by the time he was old enough he was working summers on the ranch or in the winery. I don't know how much discussion there was about it, but I think

they all just assumed he wouldn't think of doing anything else but running the family business.

Teiser: Did he?

J. Wente: I think for a moment or two he did. I really do. I think when he left home and was out on his own, so to speak, and was in college, it did pass through his mind more than once that there were some other pretty exciting things out there. Yet I think there's a very strong family feeling in the Wentes, and I think I see this in our children. They feel the responsibility for what's been left to them and for hanging onto it and making it better for the next generation. It's almost like they're overseers or caretakers for the next person coming along. I think Karl felt that very strongly, that this was an opportunity a lot of people would kill for, probably, and here it was just being more or less handed to him.

Yet I think the exceptions are Karl's, because in Karl's generation boys weren't going back to family businesses. I think perhaps even in our children's--Karl and I used to hope we would get one out of the three. We'd just laugh and say, "Isn't it fun that we have three, because surely one of them will want to do this." We tried very hard never to suggest or even indicate that we expected them to come back. I think you at least owe that much to your children to know there's no big chain there. It is their life, and if this isn't what they want to do, fine. I never ever thought I'd have all three of them. [laughs]

Teiser: What were Karl's college studies?

J. Wente: Karl majored in biochemistry. I think he seriously thought about med school for a little while there. Basically it was a scientific-oriented course.

Teiser: I'm surprised he didn't go to Davis, but I guess it wasn't so well developed then.

J. Wente: No, the viticulture department wasn't so well developed, but I think his whole family was surprised that he didn't go to Davis, especially his father, who, as you know, was one of Davis's first students. I think his being out and away during the war, it was one of the first things Karl decided on his own--that he wasn't going to go to Davis just because his father had gone to Davis, that he'd rather try something else.

Karl L. Wente in the winery, early 1970s.

Photograph courtesy Wines & Vines

Karl's war career was probably not exciting to him. He went to boot camp in Chicago--Navy--and said that he quickly learned that if you read the bulletin board every morning, there was some kind of a test you could take for something. Therefore, if you were off to take this test you weren't doing yard duty or drilling or something. [laughter] So he wound up in one of the college programs, whether it's V-12 or V-6, at Oregon State. That's where he was during the war; he was at Oregon State at one of the Navy programs.

Teiser: That was before he went to Stanford?

J. Wente: Yes, and he came into Stanford as more than a freshman.

Teiser: I suppose there was some advantage to getting whatever the learning experience is in the service.

J. Wente: I think that basically this is your officer's candidate program. They were all, I suppose, about to be ensigns or something.

Teiser: By the time he finished Stanford was he pretty sure he was going to come into the winery?

J. Wente: Yes. I don't think there was any doubt about it.

Teiser: He took a trip to Europe then?

J. Wente: Oh, the famous grand tour. It was sort of like a coming out party or something when your children went to the continent. The whole family had been planning this for Karl's graduation, I think ever since he started college or probably even before that. Everyone went: Edith [Mrs. Herman Wente] and Herman, Karl's mother and father, and another uncle, Carl, and Jess Wente, and then Karl. The only difficult part about the grand tour, I guess, was me. Karl and I met the spring of his senior year and had decided we were going to get married. We announced our engagement at the end of the school term before graduation. This whole trip had been planned--

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J. Wente: I more or less got to know the family because Karl and I would drive up from Stanford to San Francisco when they went in to get their passport pictures, and then we went in on one of the shopping expeditions and stayed for dinner with the family. Then I came to Livermore a couple of times before school was out. I came for rodeo weekend, which was always the big thing, and we had the rodeo party at Karl's aunt Frieda's, Ernest and

Herman's sister--Frieda and George Tubbs. So I knew the family pretty well, or was getting to know the family, shall we say.

I think they were truly concerned whether Karl was actually going to go. Karl and I talked it over, because Karl definitely was leaning toward the fact that he really wasn't too excited about going to Europe with these six older people. At least we both had sense enough to say, "They've been planning this for so long, and you'd do nothing but disappoint them forever," and so forth and so on. So he took off for Europe. Herman had worked very hard organizing this grand wine tour. They called on people that Herman knew, they called on people that I'm sure were contacts set up by Davis for probably Maynard [A. Amerine] or [Albert J.] Winkler at that point.

They really just had a perfectly marvelous wine tour of France. I know Karl said it was just like being royalty when they arrived. Here was Herman with the Wine Institute fame and so well recommended by Davis and all these people. And, of course, there's been a lot of traveling--maybe not as much now, but there used to be quite a lot of traveling between wine families that you don't see so much anymore. Or maybe I'm just out of it now; who knows? I do know that European wine families were always coming through Livermore and being here for a couple of days. I can't tell you how many European wine children we had live with us when our children were young.

Anyway, they had lots of contacts, and I guess it was just a 100 percent marvelous trip. Then they got back to Paris and met up with Carl and Jess and Bess, who had not gone on the wine tour; just Herman and Ernest and Carl did the wine tour. The rest of them had gone to Italy, Switzerland, and maybe called on relatives in Germany; I don't know what they were doing. Then they were all to meet and take this continued tour, which was going up into Scandinavia and around.

When they got back to Paris, Karl announced he was going home. They were all really put out with him, but he said, "No, I've done all the wine tour, which was the whole point of the trip." He said he absolutely thought it was marvelous, but he was going home to see Jean, which I think was very nice. [laughter] So he cut the trip in half. They were spending the whole summer in Europe, which was the plan, and then Karl came home. That's when we really started working on the house and so forth.

HERMAN WENTE, CONTINUED

J. Wente: I think there are even letters in Herman's files, correspondence with these people getting this marvelous trip set up. I should have gone through some of Herman's files, because we have a tremendous amount of material on Herman in our archives. I should look into that for you.

He was active in the Wine and Food Society of San Francisco, and he had several groups, I guess--I don't know if I'd call them clubs--that he kept up with that were really wine and food oriented. They had their spring wine tastings. His class at Berkeley came out every year.

Teiser: What class was it?

J. Wente: Class of '15. I'm not sure Herman actually graduated, because he was in the army during World War I. That's something interesting, when you think about the Japanese during World War II: apparently there was a tremendous amount of anti-German [sentiment] during World War I, and even in a small town like Livermore the Wagners, the Wentes, and so forth--. The Wentes felt it.

I think one of the really big things Herman did for California wine was--you know, Herman was responsible for varietal labeling. He and Frank Schoonmaker were batting themselves around about what to do, and Herman came up with the idea of grape names. Herman was desperate to get California "premium varietal" wines recognized as being that. He was still fighting all the generic things on the market--burgundy, chablis, etc. He thought of calling Sémillon "Sémillon" on the bottle, and putting Sauvignon Blanc on the bottle and so forth. He actually came up with that concept and put the vintage dates on them. Nobody was putting vintages on bottles. So he had that kind of approach: "If we're going to make this work, we

have to be upscale. We really have to show we're serious and that we're not jug wine people," and that sort of thing. So he was into that.

Of course, at that time he was into the sauterne type of wines, because Sémillon and Sauvignon Blanc were--I'm sure Ernest told you that our Sémillon and Sauvignon blanc cuttings are direct descendants from Chateau d'Yquêm. So sauternes were Herman's big interest. I think they really started out with the sweeter, residual sugar sauterne, and then Herman was working into the dry ones--really big, dry Sauvignon Blancs and so forth.

The vintage dating is fascinating to me, because there was a period not too long ago where people weren't dating bottles anymore; I'd say that in the late fifties or early sixties, vintage-dating bottles wasn't all that much of a go. This is the fad thing. Now it's back to dating bottles, and now with this Meritage and things like that, where you're combining, I suppose dating won't be as important again.

I think Herman firmly planted the idea that we were an estate vineyard, an estate winery, that you should be in charge of your own grapes and your own winemaking.

Teiser: I can see why your family got along so well with the Louis M. Martini winery, because I guess they developed these ideas a little after yours.

J. Wente: Yes, because Louis wasn't--when did Louis go up here?

Teiser: He moved to the Napa Valley from Kingsburg in 1940, but he had bought vineyard land there earlier. I think he, too, was influenced by Frank Schoonmaker.

J. Wente: Yes, I think so. I think Schoonmaker was marketing, and Herman recognized that marketing was the name of the game even then, not to the extent it is this day and age, but certainly that you had to get your product in front of the buying public. Schoonmaker was really good at that.

Now that you've mentioned Louis M. Martini, there are some marvelous stories that I hope Ernest told you about Herman, Louis Martini, and Tony Korbel traveling together and being the ambassadors for California wine on the East Coast, New Orleans, Chicago, and other places.

Teiser: That's interesting. I didn't know about that. I knew Herman Wente had gone on such trips, but I didn't know the others did.

J. Wente: He, Louis, and Tony Korbel traveled together quite frequently.

Teiser: That must have been quite a crew.

J. Wente: Can't you see them? [laughter] I'm sure there was nothing but twelve-course lunches and sixteen-course dinners.

I think before he died, Herman was really into the fact that there were going to be better type wine presses, so there had to be better type cooperage and so forth. I think he certainly had Karl indoctrinated in that, that there were better ways to do things. As I said, I think both Ernest and Herman grounded Karl very well in what it was he was supposed to do, and I think they made it exciting. It's kind of fun to get up in the morning and go to work liking what you're going to do, and I don't think there was ever a day when Karl didn't feel like that about it. I think that's really from Herman and Ernest that he had that drive.

WENTE BROS. SINCE 1949

The Winery in the Early 1950s

Teiser: When you came into the family, you could hardly have missed knowing a lot about the winery. What was it like then?

J. Wente: I probably had only about three years or so with the status quo of the buildings and so forth. When I came, the office was a minute, two little rooms in the corner of the old wooden winery, and the [Carl Wente, Sr.] family house was still there, which was kind of a fun house. It had sort of grown like Topsy. There were seven children, and it was sort of like they added for each child. [laughter] It had high ceilings and was cool.

They still had dirt floors in the winery and the old screw presses. Refrigeration was nonexistent except during harvest, when the ice truck never stopped coming, just to keep things cool. They'd run cold water through one line and wine through the other, side by side, to keep the wine cool. I remember that sort of thing. Of course, now we have all this refrigeration everywhere.

Bottling, if it wasn't completely by hand it wasn't far off, because I can remember going down in one of the trucks with Karl into a foundry type place in Berkeley or Emeryville. We brought home this corking machine that everybody was terribly excited about. We went down in a truck--we didn't have big trucks; it had to be something just maybe the next size up from a standard pickup. The man who had hand-made it was so thrilled with it that, as he carefully pointed out to Karl and me, he had on his own put this little metal wine glass on top with a bunch of grapes--just decoration on the top of this corking machine.

We came home, and it was after dark when we got back, so Karl said, "We'll just go home and unload this in the morning." He pulled into our little garage and didn't think about it, and the thing was just too tall to go in with the fancy little ornament, which just snapped right off. I've never seen anyone so upset over something that really--I mean, thank goodness it had nothing to do with the machinery. [laughter] Then the big thing was to get somebody to come who could solder that on again so that the man would never know.

So we were upgrading, but when you think that the corker we were so proud of you could put on a small truck and bring back--when I think about what's over there now. We were just beginning to do that sort of thing. Also, there was just beginning to be enough wineries and call for the technology so that developing or adapting the technology from other bottling type of things was worthwhile to companies who were making the equipment. I know that when we first started in on changing our pressing system from wooden cage, vertical basket presses to horizontal stainless steel, Pete Peters from Valley Foundry practically lived up here. Herman was still in on that. It was probably just before Herman died, maybe 1959 or somewhere along in there, when they started designing presses with Pete Peters.

At the same time, the insurance and maintenance on the wooden buildings just became absolutely prohibitive. We always laugh and say that we don't have anything antique to show that says we've been here since 1883, but on the other hand we're still here and nothing burned down. [laughter] You've seen the pictures of the old winery, and truly it wasn't that enchanting; if you think about preserving something, it wasn't. There isn't anything left of the original wooden winery; it's all new.

Teiser: Was it redone in stages?

J. Wente: It was redone in stages, yes, and they're still doing it. I always laugh and say that I seem to be the only one in a dead panic every year about whether they'll have everything back together by crush. I've never seen a piece of equipment come into this place that--first it was Karl, and then it was Bob Detjens and Karl together, and now it's Eric and Aris. They run it a little, and they think, "Well, this would really be better and more efficient if we did this to it." So we will have just paid this enormous amount of money for something, and they're taking it apart. [laughs] I'm going like this [gestures], thinking, "Gee, the grapes look like they're about ready, and they're still fooling with that press." But it always seems to work out.

Advances in the Vineyards

J. Wente: The biggest change was under Karl, because Karl really went from the lack of technology as far as equipment is concerned to state of the art winery; it all really occurred under Karl. That's everything from presses to bottling wines, too: equipment in the fields--I think about the vineyards. We had two good wells down on East Avenue, and they ran pipelines from East Avenue all the way to the top of the vineyards at the Fagoni place, which is a couple of miles, and started sprinkling--started irrigating--under Karl. And he put in an enormous reservoir for frost protection, which we never had before; we just held our breath and hoped it wouldn't freeze too long or wouldn't freeze at all. Although the latest recorded frost in our vineyard is May 22, so you always have the feeling that you're not quite home free until the first of June. Also, I think the worst berry shatter we had was probably about the fifth of June from heat, so it's a short block there. [laughs]

Then, with the advent of the canal coming through, we had access to water.

Teiser: Oh, yes. When was that?

J. Wente: Probably in the sixties.

Teiser: The Delta Mendota?

J. Wente: Yes, but this is the one that goes to San Jose.

Teiser: Does it have a name?

J. Wente: Yes; I refer to it as the canal. I'm sure it does have a name, Ruth. The only place it's underground is when it goes through Ernest's property, because Ernest would not give them the right of way to have an open canal behind his house.

Teiser: Oh, really.

J. Wente: Really. It was practically completed on both ends, and Ernest was sitting there saying, "I'm not going to do it." So they put it underground. He said, "I'm not going to wake up some morning and find I'm downtown because the canal is broken." Ernest said he had lived in that spot too long, and the hills shift; you get

a little tremor, and the hills shift. "That canal's going to shift, and it's going to dump its water, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, and maybe not in my lifetime, but it's going to happen." So they went underground behind Ernest's house, and then it comes out again.

Then we really went into piping all of the vineyards and irrigating. That led to all kinds of changes, because Karl was working with both Upright and Chisholm Ryder on mechanical harvesting, which led to how you do the viticulture in your vineyards, which led to a different kind of piping for your sprinklers so that when you were mechanically harvesting you weren't ruining your sprinkling system, because they are permanent-set sprinklers. (But drip irrigation is now being used.)

You've seen the lumber carriers and the way we handle the grapes. Karl thought that one out. He bought, for something like seven hundred dollars, a used lumber carrier. He and Cecil Aguirre built one-ton capacity steel tubs. The lumber carrier could drive over them and pick them up, and then they took these out and dropped them in the avenues in the field. Karl was trying to get rid of wooden boxes, which he thought were a mess--hard to clean, heavy, and so forth--and so they went to lightweight plastic tubs. The pickers used the plastic tubs and then dumped in these one-ton tub containers which were on little--we referred to them as burros, but they were tiny motorized carts that you could steer down vineyard rows. When those were full we put them out in an avenue, and the lumber carrier came along and picked them up and took the grapes back to the winery. So you got your fruit in quicker with less damage and all that sort of thing, which was one of the things Karl was thinking about.

That translated into doing the same thing with the mechanical harvester rig. We started out with the lumber carrier idea, and then the little geared-down--these things are like a cart with a long handle on them, and the man on the row could set this to move slowly enough so that as they went along with their small boxes, picking on each side of it, they could dump in it. Then whoever was in charge of that kept the thing moving at an adequate pace for the pickers to dump into.

With the advent of the mechanical harvester and the viticultural change of putting enough vineyard up on trellises so it could be mechanically harvested, we went to that system. I think we're probably very close to being 100 percent mechanically harvested, both here and in Arroyo Seco. But the

lumber carrier stays with us. It still does the same thing; it still brings the fruit in from the vineyards.

Teiser: I've seen those in action down in Arroyo Seco, and it never occurred to me that they were lumber carriers.

J. Wente: The harvester is built on the same principle. Even though it has all that equipment up on top and in the center, it's a lumber carrier base, and it straddles the vines.

Teiser: Those are wonderful developments. Have you gone now to any kind of mechanical pruning?

J. Wente: Not without men. But one thing we use our harvesters for--they take out the fingers that hit the vines and knock off the fruit and replace them with big, circular saw blades. They run that down the row, and what it does is get rid of the heavy outside brush. Then the pruners come in, and they're not fighting all those long canes. That's then ground up and put back as humus to keep the soil loose. Another thing it does is that we've had much less incidence of scratches or eye damage. We've never had anything really serious, but when you're fooling with those canes out there in the vineyard, they're always whipping around.

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Teiser: So you do prune--

J. Wente: With pneumatic shears. There's a compressor that goes down the row, and then there are two booms that go out with as many stations as the compressor can handle, I think probably four to six on each side. So you're covering, say, six rows on each side. Then a hose comes off at the station for each row, and it's attached to a pair of shears. You just push a button; you're not gripping and cutting. To that extent we're mechanical, and it makes it much easier and quicker to move through the vineyard pruning. It's just recently that we thought of cutting the heavy brush off first, so we're getting double use out of that mechanical harvester. This is another example of how we just can't leave anything alone, so we use it for something else, working around and coming up with another idea. Although I don't say that's one of Karl's ideas. We weren't doing that when Karl was in charge; that's something that Eric and Phil have come up with.

Phil's goal is one man per hundred acres. He thinks that with the technology and the equipment you have farming, you

should be able to get your vineyard down to where you have one man per hundred acres for maintenance and care.

Advances in the Winery

Teiser: I guess the improvements Karl made to the winery, inside and out, were just endless.

J. Wente: Well, they were. Everything from the temperature controls to the stainless steel fermenters and the stainless jacketing on them. The first stainless steel fermenters had iron jackets, not stainless. I think Cecil [Aguirre] and Karl were looking at them someplace else, and they said, "If we're going to do it, let's see if we can do it stainless all the way," because that iron bit you're going to be painting; there would be rust problems, and the maintenance would be greater. So for those outside jackets that go on the stainless steel tanks for temperature control, they did turn up with the stainless jackets as well as the stainless tanks.

I'm sure the boys will be full of what went on in the winery. Let's see if there's anything else [looking over her notes].

Expansion in Monterey County

M. Wente: Well, Monterey was all Karl's doing.

Teiser: How was that decision made?

J. Wente: Basically, there was an interesting kind of pressure going on back then. One of our main concerns was that we were losing growers, and that, in a way, put the price of what their vineyard land was going for--it indicated that if we were going to be taxed for the best use, or whatever the tax man's thing is--if somebody across the street just got $10,000 an acre, and you're being taxed as an agricultural thing, will you be taxed at $10,000 an acre or as agriculture? There was no indication that you'd be taxed as agriculture, so with that in mind we really started looking.

There were a lot of family discussions about whether we wanted to stay in the wine business. Obviously, the decision was made.

Teiser: I should ask you about the whole family participation. Would you like to discuss it later?

J. Wente: Why don't we finish with Monterey and then come back, because actually Monterey was a family decision. Ernest and Karl really did a lot of looking before they settled down in Monterey. We always laugh and say it's because of the rocks in Monterey; they reminded Ernest of being at home. But Ernest said, "No, the roots of grapevines like to have something to grab onto." That was his explanation for rocks; he said it was good to have your vines in rocks.

That's really how we wound up in Monterey. We were looking for something to hedge our bets. And, of course, it was pre-Williamson Act. Along with the tax situation, it's not terribly viable to be the only farmer in the area, shall we say. There wasn't any direct pressure on us to stop farming or to stop growing grapes or anything like that; these were all sort of peripheral things, and we were trying to make the best educated guess we could about what was going to happen to us and how quickly the valley might fill in.

Then we bought the Monterey property as a grape supply source and to hedge our bet against what might be happening here. We were really into it just a couple of years or so when the Williamson Act came along in '65. That put things back in perspective here.

Teiser: You put your land in the--

J. Wente: In the Williamson Act, yes. All of our land went into the Williamson Act. That relieved a great deal of pressure as to what would happen for a long-term site.

Teiser: Did you decide to go to Monterey because it was accessible? How do you truck things back and forth?

J. Wente: Four-lane freeway. West to #680 and south on #101. We went in because Ernest and Karl liked the soil and the climate, and it had the same kind of growing conditions that you think about being good for premium varietal grapes. One of my opening remarks for talks sometimes is that I say that California premium wine country starts just south of the Oregon border and winds up just north of Mexico, but in conjunction with coastal

valleys where the temperature is right and you're far enough inland to have warm enough days to ripen grapes, but you're not so far inland that you've got too much heat, and so forth and so on.

They just felt that the soil and climate and everything looked good, and it turned out to be absolutely true. The growing season is different. Eric can tell you that the Chardonnay that comes from Monterey is a little different from the Chardonnay from Livermore, but that's all to the good.

Back to being an estate vineyard, we bottle estate-grown Chardonnay from Monterey, and we bottle estate-grown Chardonnay from Livermore. It's nice to have the contrast and the capability of doing that.

Teiser: You can call it estate-grown even though it's not contiguous?

J. Wente: Yes. You can say "estate," but if it's not contiguous you can say "vintner[1] grown." I think that contiguous has now gone, because Carolyn is the one who got the BATF to accept vintner-grown; if you own property, farmed it, were in complete charge, and the grapes came to your production facility, you could say vintner-grown. I think now the same thing is true: if you own it, farm it, and the grapes come directly to you, you don't have to say "grown" anymore. I think you can say "estate-bottled." I think she made her point, and you don't have to say "estate-grown" anymore. She was very proud of that, and I was very proud of her for doing it--that she could get the BATF to accept that. Because it does seem funny that if the property is yours and so forth that you can't say "estate bottled" on it.[2]

Getting back to our concept of wanting to be an estate--estate in my mind connotes a family operation, as in a wine estate as opposed to--I think of farming. I think estate perhaps sounds like my tree-lined driveway to my house and swimming pool (I don't have one), but that's not what I mean. [laughs]

For Monterey grapes we use the central coast appellation for estate wine.

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[1]Since we talked, we are not using "vintner-grown" anymore. The vineyard and winery must be in the same appellation to say "estate." J.R.W.

[2]See also interview with Carolyn Wente, p. 58.

Teiser: In Monterey County at Arroyo Seco, the system worked out for handling the grapes and bringing them to the winery here --

J. Wente: At this stage the grapes are picked and mechanically harvested; everything in Arroyo Seco is mechanically harvested. The vineyards were planted to be mechanically harvested before we were really quite sure about the mechanical harvester; it wasn't quite perfected when they planted those vineyards to be mechanically harvested, but Karl said it was going to work and was the coming thing, and we might as well do it.

Karl's thrust in a lot of this was that he wanted to be able to maintain a year-round labor force and not have people coming in seasonally. He wanted his people well paid, well cared for, children in one school--not this bouncing around from when there is ranch work and when there isn't ranch work. We've really done that, because our field crew goes from pruning to cultivation to vineyard care to harvest, and we use the same year-round people. It makes for loyalty, it makes for greater interest in your job, a greater feeling of responsibility. You sit somebody up on top of a $200,000 harvester, you want that guy to be interested in what he's doing; you don't want him taking out rows of vines. The same thing is true when you're cultivating and so forth; you want them to feel a part of the operation.

Teiser: When did you start field crushing in Monterey?

J. Wente: I think the field crushing was not far behind--I'm trying to think if I remember the little burro system in Monterey with hand picking, and I truly don't, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen. But we were certainly field crushing in 1970. I have it in my mind that we almost just started out mechanically harvesting in Monterey. We still do some field crushing, but mainly whole-berry pressing now.

Teiser: At first you would have brought the grapes over here?

J. Wente: I just think about those steel boxes coming in, rather than grapes, from Monterey. I think the fun thing about Monterey was that while the vineyards were maturing, Karl started with UC Davis the mother nursery block. This is when Davis was into their heat-treating program for virus-free vines. Karl took five acres in conjunction with Davis and put in a heat-treated, certified nursery of maybe five, six, or seven different varieties of grapes. We sold cuttings out of that certified nursery for years. I guess one of the jokes was that when

somebody wanted something, they'd say, "Well, you know, we're selling those cuttings; that'll cover that." [laughs] The cuttings were a bonus. We didn't plan to have that kind of income from Monterey. I mean, it takes you five years to get a new vineyard going.

The cutting business was just fantastic, and Karl was there at the right time with certified cuttings, just as all the 1960 plantings went in all over California. The record of our cutting book reads like Who's Who in the wine industry. I think we sold cuttings everywhere, all up and down Napa, Sonoma, Canada, Virginia, Mexico, Missouri. A lot of the new vineyards in the states of Washington and Oregon are right off of cuttings out of the Arroyo Seco vineyard. As I say, we always teased and said, "Well, we have the cutting money; we'll do it with that."

Teiser: You've always had a plant nursery here, haven't you?

J. Wente: Yes, but not on the scale that we were doing it there, and of course this was certified, guaranteed wood. If you handled it properly, presumably you wouldn't have any problems in your vineyards.

Teiser: I believe that an earlier operator of Chalone Vineyard, Will Silvear, had got cuttings from the Wente nursery.

J. Wente: He brought grapes to the winery here. He pickup-trucked his fifteen boxes a day from Chalone. Whatever he picked, he'd bring them down in a pickup truck, and Ernest did the crushing and bottling for him. At least he took his grapes. Now, when I say the crushing and bottling, I can't remember Will Silvear with a Chalone label or any label, but he was almost on the way out when I was on the way in. That's something that Hilma [Hagemann] will probably know about, or even Cecil. Certainly Bruno [Canziani] would know about that, because I do remember meeting Will Silvear. He was absolutely marvelous.

Teiser: Was he?

J. Wente: Fun to talk to, did it all himself up there on that earthquake fault, quaking all the time [laughs]. Herman really encouraged him like crazy, because he thought he had good grapes and it was a good place to have them.

Teiser: That's interesting. I didn't know that.

J. Wente: I think of Will Silvear in conjunction with Herman and Ernest, not Karl, so that's the vintage he would have been.

Teiser: He also had Almaden [Vineyards] make a champagne for him. I've seen the bottle. These things tie in interestingly. He was growing grapes at Chalone in the 1930s and 1940s. I've uncovered a little mythology about him.

J. Wente: I think that's fun that the mythology is there, because I think that someone like Will Silvear, where the people who knew him personally are no longer around, would develop a cult almost. I could see where something like that would happen.

What else can I tell you about Karl in Monterey?

Teiser: Yes, I'm sorry I distracted you.

J. Wente: Oh, I'm sort of Ernest's pupil. I could just sit and listen to him--we had offices across from each other, and Ernest would come in around mealtime, go home at lunch, and then come back at mid-afternoon. He'd say things like, "Can you hang up the phone now and come in? I want to talk to you." I told Carolyn--he wouldn't do it for me, but for Carolyn he did a Livermore book about families and things in Livermore, as opposed to the kind of thing he did with you [in his Regional Oral History Office interview] on vineyards and California wine.[3]

Teiser: Do you have more on Monterey?

J. Wente: Just that in planting in Monterey, Karl had always been interested in champagne and in making champagne. That was always something that was down the road, and he didn't make it; the road stopped for him before he got into the champagne business. But I do think it's interesting that Monterey really has the perfect climate for champagne grapes. I think the boys' interest in going into champagne is a little bit of tipping our hat to Karl.

Teiser: Did Karl make some experimentally?

J. Wente: Yes. Actually, Herman was always doing that. Herman was the biggest wine and grape trader going. We always had unlabeled champagne. Somebody made it out of our wine, and in return Herman would make something for them. The industry was very

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[3]Ernest A. Wente, Memories of the Early History of the Livermore Valley, privately printed, 1981; 57 pp.

small at that point. That was not only done, it was acceptable. You didn't have to track the wine like you do now and all that sort of thing. The regulatory system of the wine industry now, I think, is one of it's greatest hazards; it may be what finally does it in--all the government regulations.

Teiser: Of course Wente Bros. did some bulk wine business still when you were first married, didn't they?

J. Wente: We were just about out of that. We had half-gallon jugs--the half-gallon jugs with the little hook handle--that were only sold in the tasting room. It was almost like on Friday afternoon locals came in and bought their red wine for the weekend or the next week. But when I arrived they were no longer shipping any uncorked finished jugs. Bruno can tell you about that.

Ownership, Decision Making, and Responsibilities

J. Wente: Let me go back to the family interest in the winery. Herman and Ernest were the complete owners of the winery; from their father [Carl Heinrich Wente] they bought the winery and the vineyards. Herman left his to Edith, and then Edith to Karl, although Herman left Karl stock or something. Anyway, it was certainly understood from Herman's will that anything to do with the vineyards and the winery would become Karl's. The same thing was true of Ernest. As life becomes more complicated and estates become more complicated, we all now have stock, but there's no outside stock; it's strictly family. It's a corporation that is strictly family-owned stock now.

I've tried to give mine away as fast as I can--you know, estate planning and all that sort of thing. Basically, the three children all have an equal amount. We're beginning to pass things on to Christine and Karl, who are Eric's children. But it's all family owned.

Teiser: I see you were on the board early on. Have you always been on the board?

J. Wente: No. I would say that was after Edith's death. That's the date that passes into my mind, and I don't know why. I could certainly find out just by looking at the minutes book, but I think officially that's probably about right. If not when Edith

died, then when Edith stopped being interested in it. With Herman's dying, Edith was on the board. Perhaps I went on a bit earlier than her death, because I know she just said, "Enough's enough."

Teiser: What is the board's function?

J. Wente: The board functions as any corporate board functions. We have an annual meeting, we meet as executive committee or when necessary to conduct the corporate business. These are very serious meetings when we have them, but on the other hand I'd say that board meetings go on every day, because all three children talk to each other every day, and I see them. [laughs]

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Teiser: You're now chairman of the board?

J. Wente: Yes. I think that means I've reached my sixty-fifth birthday. [laughter]

KARL L. WENTE'S INDUSTRY AND COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Teiser: Going on to Karl's activities in various industry and local organizations --

J. Wente: He was director of the Wine Institute and the Wine Advisory Board. I think maybe he was the youngest chairman of the Wine Institute; he was very early on a director of the Wine Institute. Then he was on the state college university system board, and he chaired that. He was on the Bank of America board, he was on the board of PG&E [Pacific Gass and Electric Co.], he was on the California State Automobile Association board.

Locally he was one of the founding directors at the local hospital and was chairman of that. He was one of the founding organizers of the Zone Seven water district and I think was its first chairman. He was in his late twenties then; he was a young chairman. What else? He was so busy, that just seems like nothing.

Teiser: He must have been very willing to take responsibility.

J. Wente: I think he felt that when you take, you give back, very definitely. Oh, he belonged to the Bohemian Club and Wine and Food Society of San Francisco. Those are fun things as opposed to--. I think one of the things that's interesting to me as I see what we're doing now and the kind of pause we've had, I always feel like there was a generation gap in our public relations between Herman and Carolyn and Phil and Eric. Karl was forty-nine when he died, and he was just backing away from the business to a certain extent, which is one reason for some of these boards; he was looking for something to do that was interesting to him and to get out of the kids' hair. He said, "You know, I can see that I need to start--." I think what he was really saying, too, was that he wasn't going to be there as

long as grandfather and Herman, breathing down their necks. Although then he'd immediately say, "I can't really say they were breathing down my neck." But he wanted the boys to feel there was someplace to go and that they would be in charge.

Karl was very outgoing and gregarious, and I still run into people who suddenly identify the name and say, "I knew your husband. I can't tell you how much he influenced me, what he did for me. He was just one of the most outstanding people I've ever come across," and so forth. And this is a long time after--Karl has been dead for fourteen years now, and I still run into people who don't know me; it's just a name association.

Teiser: I have a little story. I had to appear before the Wine Advisory Board to get some money for this series, and he was conducting the meeting. I was frozen with fright, having had no experience with that sort of thing. He looked at me and nodded, and smiled, and I thought, "Well, okay." He just gave me confidence to get up there and ask for $10,000. I've always remembered that very kind gesture.

J. Wente: When I think how the p.r. end of the wine industry and the marketing end of the wine industry have changed--I think from Herman and Ernest and it being feasible to be a home family winery, the wine industry has taken this big, technological, capital-intensive swing. Your marketing and your public relations and so forth are every bit, if not more, important. You can't afford not to be doing the right thing in the field and in the winery, but whether those things translate to staying in business has to do with your marketing and your public relations.

Karl was one of these people, like Herman, who knew everybody and was into a lot of things, was well liked, and was aware of this change coming on. He was looking at our relationship with our distributors, both main distributors and wholesalers and distributors throughout the country, and how this should become a part of something that we should be paying very close attention to, and on and on. Then Karl died. I will say that when Karl died there wasn't this overabundance or proliferation of wine writers, wine magazines, wine critics, and every restaurant maitre d' being a wine buff and all that sort of thing. This has sort of come even much more strongly post-Karl than when Karl was alive, but he was very aware that this was in the offing.

I think that Jean and the two boys and then Carolyn were so concerned with keeping the vineyards going and the winery

going--even though we'd all been around forever and should have osmosed a lot more than we did, we actually found out that we knew a lot more than we thought we did, which was surprising. But for quite a few years we missed out on that one segment that we should have been paying attention to, and I think that had Karl been around he would have been doing a lot more of that while the boys were getting their feet wet in the winery and the vineyard--where he could keep an eye on it, but they weren't going to get into any serious problems; he could be out doing more of the marketing end and that kind of thing.

I think the children are doing a fantastic job now. I think they're back on it; they're really on top of it. Carolyn is a whiz at it, and so is Philip. Eric doesn't have quite the same opportunity because his responsibilities in the business take him in a different direction. That's something that I see as probably a fault of mine; I didn't pick up on it.

Well, let's get back to family. I forget what brought this on! We were talking about the family involvement in the business.

Teiser: I guess you're part of the p.r. now, too, aren't you? Or you always have been?

J. Wente: I think I always have been, in a way, because I laugh and say that I served more p.r. meals and made more p.r. beds than probably anyone. [laughter] That was part of the business. We entertained at home constantly, and I enjoyed every minute of it. Rarely were there any bummers. I think you meet interesting people. I don't know what it is about wine and the good life, but I do think you meet fascinating people whose vocation is not necessarily the wine industry; it's their avocation. Goodness knows, we've had marvelous people come through in the course of meeting them businesswise.

Teiser: Do you give talks about your wines?

J. Wente: Yes, we all do. Arel, who is Eric's wife, is excellent at it. She's a good ambassador for us; she really is. Of course, Carolyn and Phil are at it all the time just in their marketing and so forth. I am doing less and less. I'm playing my back-off role. I find my span of attention for traveling is great, but my span of attention for business traveling is shorter and shorter. I find it harder to keep a smile pasted on my face from six o'clock in the morning until midnight, working. I think the children are all so good at it, and I think it's time I did a little "Jean" thing or two.

Teiser: They're very personable people, so I'm sure they make good impressions.

J. Wente: I'm fantastically fortunate that the three of them are interested in the family business and that they all get along so well. They each basically have a niche, and it all overlaps. They each have their own territory, and it works out extremely well.

JEAN WENTE'S WORK WITH CULTURAL AND OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

Teiser: I want to ask you about your own very active participation in art.

J. Wente: I guess I'm a "museumer." I've always been interested in museums. I suppose this was part of my family, because Corcoran was probably fifteen hundred to two thousand people, twenty-five hundred at the most when I was growing up, so it was a very small town. When my father had a business trip and it was feasible, or perhaps even when we could afford it, he was very big on taking us to San Francisco or Los Angles, staying in hotels, going to plays, going to museums, and doing that sort of thing. He was also very big on taking us to baseball and football games. [laughs] I was really very fortunate.

I was sort of looking for a niche of something to do. This opportunity came up to be part of the beginning of the Oakland Museum, and I just found that fascinating. One thing I like about it is that it's an ongoing learning experience. There's nothing stagnant about a museum, or static either, as far as that goes, and there are so many facets to it, from keeping the doors open to the actual collections. It has now turned out that I'm the current chairman of the Museum Trustee Association, which is a national organization with headquarters in Washington. We are about museum governance, which of course is the realm of museum trustees.

I'm enjoying it thoroughly. It's like anything: the board meets four times a year, but I'm on the phone every day at six o'clock in the morning because of the East Coast/West Coast time schedule. And everybody knows they can get me early in the morning, too. I'm doing a fair amount of traveling in conjunction with this job. I find it continuing to be absolutely fascinating. The people you meet, the museums, the collections, and the doors that are opened to you are just marvelous. I feel that museums are going to, and should, be playing a bigger and bigger role in education. I think our

education system needs to take advantage of museums, and museums need to take advantage of what they can offer in the way of education, which is really unlimited.

Teiser: You've been on the board of the California College of Arts and Crafts [CCAC]?

J. Wente: Yes, I have. I am the just-retired chairman. Rod Lorimer of Clorox is the new chairman; he's been chairman about six or eight months now.

Teiser: Did your interest in the Oakland Museum come out of that?

J. Wente: No, I was on the board of the Oakland Museum before I was on the board at CCAC. Well, I think an art college--it's education, it's art, it's cultural approach to things--is a fascinating thing to be involved in.

Teiser: You're also on some other boards. You're on the California State Automobile Association board.

J. Wente: Yes, I am. Let's see--I'm still on the CCAC college board. Gee, my mind is absolutely blank, but let me pull out a Jean Wente resumé [laughs].[1] I work on several things with Stanford, but I think everyone--we always laugh and say, "Your degree is only as good as your college." It's the credibility of your college, and I'm sure Stanford's credibility will pick up shortly after the trouble [President] Donald Kennedy has had [with the charge of misuse of federal funds].

Oh, something that I think is kind of fun is the Brotherhood of the Knights of the Vines. I was their first Supreme Lady of the Vine. It's a national organization with most chapters in California, and I thought it was rather enchanting that they asked me to be their first Supreme Lady.

I've been active in the Monterey winegrowers' groups and in the Livermore Valley winegrowers' groups.

Teiser: Are the Monterey people active?

J. Wente: They are. It's amazing; I went to the annual meeting at the end of February, and there are something like twenty plus members listed now, whereas there used to be five or six that were actually growing grapes and in the wine business. That has a lot to do with it. When you look at Napa and Sonoma, where

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[1]See p. 34a.

WENTE BROS.
Fine Wines Since 1883

Jean R. Wente (Mrs. Karl L.)
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1992

Chairman, Wente Bros., Inc.
Vineyards and Wineries

Current Community Activities
Founding Board Member of the Museum Trustee Association and current chairman.
Trustee Winterthur Museum and Garden
Trustee and immediate past Chairman of California College of Arts and Crafts
Honorary Chairman of the Livermore Valley Wine museum Foundation

Member of Stanford Associates, Stanford University
Member of Steering Committee for Friends of Radiology, Stanford University School of Medicine
Member of Committee for Art, Stanford University
Member of Humanities Study Group, Stanford University

Trustee of World Affairs Council of Northern California
California Commission on Campaign Financing
ARCS (Achievement Rewards for College Scientists) National Board Member
Board member Oakland/Alameda County Coliseum Foundation
California Associates, a study group with membership mainly from the Los Angeles area

Former Community Activities
Chairman and Board Member of Oakland Museum Association; President and Board Member of Oakland Museum Association Women's Board
Member of Committee that established NEH state-based humanities program in California
Alameda County Architect Selection Committee
Chairman Alameda County Art Commission
Advisory Committee Rand Corporation/Urban Institute on Immigration Policy

there are several hundred wineries in each county, I think that has a lot to do with it. I was quite excited to see the enthusiasm and the new faces, and there are quite a few new, small wineries going in down there, which is what it needs to make it go. Of course, we're growers down there, as opposed to being a facility presence. You don't get a lot of touring until you have facility presence; you can look at a vine, and then you can look at the next vine, but if you can't taste the product--.

You know, Monterey grapes are everywhere; if you pick up a bottle of wine, you may very well have Monterey grapes in it.

KARL L. WENTE'S CONCERNS

Teiser: Was Karl ill for a time before he died?

J. Wente: Karl was diagnosed as having Hodgkins [disease] twelve years before he died. He went through very intensive treatment at Stanford, which has one of the outstanding programs for Hodgkins in the country. He was there under treatment for the better part of a year, and then he went back for regular checkups. Dr. Henry Kaplan said something to me about Karl taking more treatment than they'd ever given anyone before and having it work, and that the young interns were laying bets on whether he'd walk in for his last treatment or not. They're so debilitating that people would come in, and they'd wind up coming in in a wheelchair, but Karl walked in for his last treatment.

For all intents and purposes, as far as outward appearances, he was just fine for the following ten years. I think that what happened to Karl when he died--it's like getting polio the day before the Salk vaccine; I think they've now advanced the treatment enough that they can handle it. He signed on as an experimental case. His Hodgkins was very well advanced when they found it.

Teiser: The reason I asked is that I wondered if he planned with you for the future.

J. Wente: Yes, I think so. We talked a great deal about it from then on.

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J. Wente: Not detailed planning, but we certainly did estate planning and that type of thing far more seriously after we found out about the Hodgkins. Something I should have said early on is that Karl was very aware of being an only child for the older

generation, and he felt very responsible for them. We talked about that and the fact that I would then be responsible. We talked about the children and education for them and that type of thing.

Karl always, from the day we were married, talked business with me. He'd come home and say, "Let me try this out on you," or "What do you think about this?" That sort of thing. When he died, I thought, "You dumb-dumb, why didn't you pay more attention?" Early on, before the Hodgkins, I was busy with three children and running the house and so forth, and I don't think you ever think about what happened happening. But Karl was very sharing about the business, and especially after the Hodgkins. Well, after the Hodgkins, I paid more attention; let's put it that way.

Teiser: Did you have clear ideas then about how your children would function in the business?

J. Wente: When Karl died, Eric was back working for us, having gone to grad school at Davis. Phil was just out of Davis and just back and working. I've never even put this to the kids particularly, but whether, if Karl hadn't had Hodgkins, both boys would have turned up or not, I don't know. They're so close together in age, and they're so different. I think that's the reason it works. It used to be that if I took on Phil, Eric would say, "Mother, you don't understand the situation," and so on. If I take on Eric, Phil's right in there, "Mother--." [laughs] They've always been like that.

Whether there would have been enough going to keep all three of them truly busy, even though Karl was planning to back off--at that point Ernest was still reasonably active, and I think Karl worried about whether he could find enough to keep those two bright boys interested. I think they probably more seriously thought about returning knowing about the Hodgkins than they might have otherwise. That may be just my own feeling about it.

Teiser: Did the older generation have any idea that Carolyn would come into the business?

J. Wente: I think her grandfather hoped she would, but I don't think he thought about it until after Karl died. I don't think they seriously considered that she might do that. I think Karl would have been delighted to know she was back. Ernest was from the generation where you were a hausfrau, although I must say he tipped his hat in my direction a couple of times, [laughs], bless his heart. He was a marvelous support.

We laugh, because when Carolyn graduated from college, we sure didn't have anything to do with her. We had no place to slot her, she had no skills we could use--answering the telephone or using a typewriter and that sort of thing--so we shipped her off. It was kind of fun, because she learned a lot, and she learned very quickly. She's got a good grasp of the business and certainly knows the wine business inside and out at this point, and, as I say, is marvelous with marketing and public relations.

Teiser: She certainly has a good presence.

J. Wente: Yes. I guess maybe it was four or five years before we brought her home, and she's been invaluable ever since.

Teiser: I daresay you had something to do with it.

J. Wente: Maybe it goes back to Karl. I said Karl had kind of an unusual childhood in that everybody was around. He had his grandparents; you know, his grandfather Monihan lived with them, and his Wente grandparents were just down the road, and he spent a terrific amount of time there. He had all these doting aunts and uncles. I mean, he really had a family support group going.

I can say exactly the same thing for my three. Karl ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner at home; he would come by during the pre-school years with the kids if he was doing something where he could handle it. You know, the two boys are just seventeen months apart, so they're practically twins. He'd come by and pick up the little boys, take them in the pickup truck and be gone for two hours, the most divine thing that could possibly happen to a mother. [laughs] I think a lot of it has to do with that kind of thing, and that's not the norm for kids. I think there's something about having the ranch and living on it and being with your grandparents and your father and your great aunts and uncles. It all translates into a very firm family feeling.

Teiser: I think we've covered all the main subjects I've thought of. I will be talking with your children--adult children.

J. Wente: Well, I think of them as kids. [laughs] I love talking to you. The children and I are extremely flattered to think that you want to continue on with the family. We sort of look at ourselves as practically an institution at this point. [laughs]

Back to Karl again--when the wine business was beginning to expand with all the new wineries and the new growth in vineyards, Karl was a constant source of information for these people. Karl consulted for more beginning wineries and vineyardists and did it willingly. It was just like Herman saying, "We need the expanded industry, we need the top quality, we need to be going in that direction." I think of all the people who came through our winery when Karl was still with us, looking at it for all the innovative ideas and things that they would like to be doing. It was sort of pointed out as, "Go down and talk to Wente."

Teiser: Can you think of some of those who came to him?

J. Wente: I will. I think the ones I enjoyed most were the Spaniards who kept coming. I will put my mind on that.

Teiser: I'd like to know what the influence of this winery has been elsewhere. Thank you very much.

CAROLYN WENTE

Carolyn Wente, the youngest of the three children of Jean R. and Karl L. Wente, was born in Livermore in 1955, attended local schools, and, like her brothers, worked at various tasks in the winery and on the family ranch. At Stanford she studied history and also took business courses. After graduating, she worked as a financial analyst at Crocker Bank in San Francisco for several years. In 1980 her brothers asked her to join Wente Bros. as vice president for public relations and marketing.

She was interviewed at her home on the ranch, following a back operation, in bed but active, surrounded by communication and business equipment.

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Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Carolyn Wente Layton

Date of birth 11-6-55 Birthplace Livermore, CA

Father's full name Karl Laird Wente

Occupation Farmer Birthplace Livermore, CA

Mother's full name Eugenia Robinson Wente

Occupation Chairman Birthplace Hanford, CA

Your spouse Buxton Lawn Layton

Occupation Banker Birthplace New Orleans, LA

Your children N/A

Where did you grow up? Livermore

Present community Livermore

Education Livermore High School
Stanford University, BA

Occupation(s) Marketing

Areas of expertise Marketing, public relations

Other interests or activities Tennis, Horseback Riding, History, Music

Organizations in which you are active American Institute of Wine & Food, Alameda County Economic Development Board, Knights of the Vine, Livermore Valley Winegrowers Assn, Les Dames d'Escoffier

Carolyn Wente, circa 1990

INTERVIEW WITH CAROLYN WENTE

CHILDHOOD AND SCHOOL YEARS, 1955-1980

[Interview date: April 25, 1991]##

Teiser: Let's start at the beginning: when were you born, and where were you born?

Carolyn Wente: I was born November 6, 1955, in St. Paul's Hospital, which is the same hospital my father was born in, and his claim to fame was being the very first Livermore baby born in that hospital.

Teiser: There must have been a few in between.

C. Wente: I think so, like both my brothers!

Teiser: Then you came to the family home?

C. Wente: I came home and was raised in Livermore on our ranch--what we refer to as the Mel ranch, which was the original property that Louis Mel and his wife purchased here in Livermore and where they built their weekend home. That home is where I spent the first five years of my life, and then my parents built a house on the hill above the old Mel home, where I grew up the rest of the time.

It's about a mile or two miles from the original estate winery on Tesla Road. My mother still lives there today. Arturo Chavez, who is our vineyard manager here in Livermore, lives in the Mel house now. In 1983, when we celebrated Wente Bros.' one-hundredth anniversary, we renovated the old Mel winery to use it as an entertainment facility upstairs, and then downstairs was a cellar with barrels and stuff for aging.

Teiser: Where is that ?

C. Wente: It's off of Tesla Road, and it's directly behind the old Mel house, built into the side of the hill.

Teiser: What was your childhood like?

C. Wente: I went to Livermore public schools all the way through high school. It was during a time when the city of Livermore was growing quite a bit, because every year a new school was built. Because I lived out in the country and they picked all the country children up on buses, we were bussed around to all the new schools as they opened to help fill them up as the new neighborhoods were growing in Livermore. Many of the new neighborhoods that went in were where old vineyards were; people had sold off their land. The Wagner vineyard would be one, and there's a housing tract here in Livermore that's called the Wagner tract.

My life was going to these public schools and ending up in Livermore High and graduating from there. It's the same school my father went to and graduated from. Other than schooling, I remember, virtually every weekend or after school, working on the cattle ranch with my grandfather, riding horses, looking out for the fence, checking on the cows with the calves with him; or riding in the vineyards with my father, checking on what the grapevines were doing at various times of the year.

Working in the Winery

C.Wente: When I got to an age where I could be of some use in the winery or working summer vacations, like my two brothers I worked in virtually every position throughout the winery.

The first job I had in the winery was working on the bottling line, putting caps on the bottling line and then tailing off, casing the wines, and checking the labels. From that point on I knew that school looked pretty good [laughs], because that was not exactly my idea of what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. That is certainly all automated today and is a little bit different operation than it was then.

Then I worked in the tasting room, in the office, and various jobs around. My exposure to the winery was every vacation working there or sometimes after school if an extra hand was needed.

Teiser: Was that unusual for a girl at that time?

C. Wente: A lot of my friends, certainly through high school, had jobs or worked. I think my grandfather and my parents, particularly, never really treated me any differently from my brothers. I think they expected that we should all pull our oar and do what we needed to do. I think there was maybe a lesson to be learned from that, that the wine business and the farming business is hard work, but it also provides a nice lifestyle. That certainly showed in the fact that all three of us wanted to come back and be a part of it. Without that subtle lesson being learned early on, maybe Eric would have gone on to be a doctor, I might have been a banker, and Philip a skier, I don't know. [laughs]

Teiser: Girls were not necessarily destined for jobs in wineries earlier, or were they?

C. Wente: My grandmother was the first chemist or lab analyst that we had. She did all of the lab analyses for my great-uncle Herman, so she was always involved. My mother certainly, from day one that I can remember, was always involved with the entertainment and public relations side of things, which is probably the more traditional role that women in the wine business had always taken in supporting their husbands.

My role at the winery is marketing now, along with all the auxiliary functions that fall under marketing. I don't think that in my mind I wanted to be winemaker. The vineyards always interested me, the cattle ranch interested me, maybe because I was much more of an outdoors person, but I always felt that I might end up on the business side or the p.r.--the marketing--side, and in fact that's what happened.

Teiser: I didn't realize there was that much continuity.

Stanford, Washington, and Crocker Bank

Teiser: You were at Stanford and studied history. Did you study some chemistry, too?

C. Wente: History was my major, and I chose it because I certainly enjoyed history and thought it really gave me a broad background. It was very easy for me and allowed me to take a lot of other

classes that I wanted to take which were probably more business related. Stanford doesn't have an undergraduate business degree, so I ended up taking accounting, computer science, and those kinds of things. No chemistry; I don't have any chemistry background. I leave that to my brother Eric and my brother Phil.

Teiser: When you got out of college, what did you intend to do immediately?

C. Wente: In my senior year I was a quarter ahead at Stanford, and I took the winter quarter off and went back to Washington, D.C., and worked as an intern for Senator [Paul] Laxalt. I very much enjoyed Washington, but during my period in Washington was when my father died, so I came back to be with my family and my mother, in particular, to support her and be around through the end of that winter quarter. Then I went back to Stanford in the spring and finished up.

At that point I felt, maybe being a little independent, that I wanted to go find a job outside the winery. At some point I always felt I would come back and work at the winery, but I also felt it was in a very transitional state, and both of my brothers were getting their arms around what was going on. My grandfather was there, and my mother was also very involved. In my mind I needed to go out and establish who I was and do what I wanted to do.

So I got a job with Crocker Bank as a financial analyst in their agricultural banking department. Over the next three plus years that I worked for Crocker I did financial and business planning for their commercial and agricultural banking department. I very much enjoyed that, learned a lot. They were very supportive of me and my endeavors at the bank.

Teiser: In spite of your uncle Carl's association with Bank of America?

C. Wente: Yes. Maybe they were eternally hopeful at that point that Wente Bros. might come toward Crocker, but I think I made it quite clear that there was a strong connection with the Bank of America. [laughs] I think they also realized that at some point I might go back and work in the family business. In fact, I had said that to them when I interviewed with them.

Finally I decided to come back to the winery when Crocker started to invest a lot of time and money in me. They were going to put me in what they called their fast track management training program, at which point I felt that they were making an

investment and that I needed to really decide what I was going to do about the winery. At the same time, my brothers had come to me--this was in 1980--and said, "We recognize the need for hiring someone to do marketing and public relations for the winery; we have our hands full with the vineyards and the production side. Is this something that you're interested in? If not, we're going to hire somebody else." I said, "You bet! I'd be very interested in it."

WENTE BROS. SINCE 1980

C. Wente: I think the timing was right at that time for me to come back, and so I did. I joined the winery in October of 1980, and I've been here ever since.

Teiser: Most jobs develop as you go along. Was yours then what it is now?

C. Wente: I think you'd probably get three different perspectives on that. My job is not at all like it was when I first joined the winery, and I think all jobs change as one gains experience. My brother Phil at one point had said to me, "Your training obviously was not strong on the marketing side, but as Eric felt, and we all believe, that we're fairly smart, logical individuals, we can take ideas and develop them and do things. There's nothing that we don't feel we can tackle and go after." He felt I'd be very successful in that area and could do a good job, but there needed to be some amount of guidance. I think he kept prodding my brother Eric, saying, "Are you, as president of the winery, guiding Carolyn and giving her the direction that she needs to understand where she ought to go?" I think Eric certainly had the same feeling, that he needed to be a good goal-setter for me.

My feeling about coming back into the winery was that I didn't want to step on anybody's toes, because certainly somebody had been doing the marketing. It had been pretty much split up between Eric and Phil and our national marketing company, Parrott & Co. So I didn't want to come in and step on somebody's toes and say, "Okay, I'm going to take over this and take over your territory." On the other hand, I think Eric and Phil looked at me and said, "Here, you can do this," and just sort of brushed their hands. "There is more than enough to do; roll up your sleeves and get to work." That was a good, healthy

attitude and one that encouraged me to roll up my sleeves and go to work.

Winery Goals in Transition, 1980-1990

C. Wente: For us, back in 1980, we were probably at the peak of our sales volume under the Wente brand or label. That was primarily with the Le Blanc de Blancs, Grey Riesling, and chablis at that point, which were the more moderate to lower-priced wines. Our Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blancs, Sémillons were all sold out at that time; we couldn't make enough to keep up with the demand. Somehow the Le Blancs and Grey became the bigger volume items; we were able to buy grapes from other people and increase the production more rapidly than we did with the Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blancs.

Teiser: You cut back on those?

C. Wente: I think my father kind of saw the writing on the wall for the way the market was going and where the consumers' tastes were going--towards the premium high end wines, the pinnacle wines being Cabernet, Pinot Noir, Chardonnay, or Sauvignon Blanc. If you look back during the seventies, those were the wines he was moving towards in producing, doing vineyard selections on them and making smaller, estate-bottled lots. It's not that the Grey Riesling and the Le Blanc de Blancs weren't a major part of the winery; they were a major part of the volume and the cash flow but not, I think, the direction where my father saw it going.

When Eric took over the winery in 1977, when my father died, I think the winery was geared up to be much more of a production-driven winery and less market driven. In the last ten years, from 1980 to 1990, the three of us have really recognized the fact that the wine business is much more marketing oriented than production oriented. We've had to make those adjustments at Wente Bros., and it's been a bit of a struggle. I think a lot of people recognized Wente Bros.'as a white wine winery, and probably recognized it as Grey Riesling and Le Blanc de Blancs because they became such popular wines in the seventies and early eighties. Most people don't recognize the fact that Wente Bros. was the first one to produce Chardonnay with the variety labeled as such, or all the Chardonnay cloning that my grandfather and great uncle did, or all the foundation vineyards that we got into. We were truly on the premium side always; that is the backbone of our business.

I think that's what my brothers and I recognized and where we intend to emphasize or take the business.

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C Wente: And that we needed to first start in the vineyards and make sure all of our vineyard plantings were planted to Chardonnay and Sauvignon blanc in the right areas, Cabernet in the right area. That included the expansion of vineyards down to Monterey and extending our vineyards here in Livermore. We are truly focusing on the fact that the three top varieties that we want to produce are Chardonnay, Sauvignon blanc, and Cabernet Sauvignon.

Teiser: You're fortunate in that you have your own nursery.

C. Wente: Yes. You'll have to talk to Philip about this, because he certainly knows more about it. Maybe my mother talked about it, because it is probably clearer in her memory and less clear in mine about the nursery that we had down in Monterey; the number of cuttings that we sold virtually funded our vineyard. I mean, we paid off the Monterey vineyard by selling all these grape cuttings during the early seventies when all these new vineyards were flourishing. We're very grateful for that and glad to see the expansion of vineyards in California.

Marketing and Promotion

Teiser: As you settled into your job--even the term "marketing" hasn't been used in the wine industry so long. How did you know the functions of a marketing manager?

C. Wente: I think you see a need, and you fill it. Certainly the needs arise by the questions wholesalers ask you; the materials that they want or need to sell your wines with have to fit into an overall vision of where we as a winery see ourselves and what we want to recognize and be recognized as. All of those things, interrelated, created a whole list of projects that needed to be done. I think with any list, somebody can go down the list and get those things accomplished, so it's kind of on-the-job training, if you will. [laughs]

Teiser: What were the projects like?

C. Wente: To start off with, since I came back in the 1980s, one of the first projects I did was to say, "Okay, what tools do we have to sell our wines? What things are coming up that we can talk

about that will help sell our wines and position us in the marketplace?" Probably the major thing that came up was the fact that we were going to be celebrating our centennial in 1983. That would probably have been the first major event that I did on the public relations side. I got together with Donna Wilcox, who was the general manager at that time at Concannon Vineyard.[1]

Teiser: She's with you now?

C. Wente: She's with us now. It was actually the first time I had met her. We got together for lunch one day and started talking about how we both had our one-hundredth anniversaries coming up, and we ought to put on some sort of joint celebration. We started brainstorming. That was about a year before--sometime in 1982. So we planned several events for 1983 with both wineries. The largest event was what we called the centennial weekend, which was a two-day event. We had over 25,000 people come through the valley and were just amazed at the response we got from people coming out to celebrate the two wineries' birthdays.

I think it awakened people's awareness to the Livermore Valley again. Because we don't have the number of wineries that are in Napa or Sonoma, I think people have forgotten a little bit about Livermore; there just aren't the numbers of wineries out there banging on everybody's door, saying, "We're from Livermore," "Livermore," "the Livermore Valley," which also helps on the marketing side. The more people you have out there saying where you're from, the greater recognition you're going to get. That was some of the reawakening in the local people's minds about the fact that there were two strong wineries out here.

Since then we've had several new wineries start up in the Livermore Valley. We have a lot of projects underway, which my brother Phil will probably talk about, because he's very much into what we think is the renaissance of the Livermore Valley in terms of the vineyards and wineries. We feel there's a strong positive atmosphere for future growth in the viticulture and winery area here.

Back to the centennial, I think that was a very major event that took a lot of planning, got us kicked off in the right

[1]In 1992 Concannon Vineyards was acquired by Wente Bros.

direction, and brought a lot of attention to the one-hundred-year-old wineries.

But then where do we go from there? It simply became a lot of time on the road for me, talking to different wholesalers, understanding how they saw Wente Bros., what we needed to do to convince them about who we were and where we were going. I think we still are working on that and working very hard at it.

Teiser: I seem to remember that you were traveling with Carolyn Martini. Did you put on joint presentations?

C. Wente: As you know, we had been marketing our wines with the Martini winery since the 1940s.

Teiser: Through Parrott & Co.?

C. Wente: Yes. Then back in 1975, I believe it was, we purchased Parrott & Co. with the Martinis from the Menzies family, who had owned it for a hundred-plus years. We continued to market our wines together, and I think that's where the strong association for California wines--Martini for reds, Wente for whites--came through, which is still fairly true, although I think there were benefits of the Wentes and Martinis splitting up back in 1988. The Martinis left Parrott & Co., and Wente bought out their portion, so it has become a wholly owned subsidiary of Wente Bros. and is our marketing arm. We have a national sales force that is still Parrott & Co. and representing brands other than Wente Bros.; they have three or four other wineries, some imports, a couple of spirits brands, and Ficklin port that we still represent nationally.

Back to Martini and Wente, the Martinis, I think, upon splitting up had an opportunity. As Carolyn Martini put it, "When we sold our wines together, they'd always present Wente Chardonnay and Martini Cabernet. Now we can introduce a whole new generation to the fact that Martini produces white wines. People generally start with white wines, so it'll be a natural progression for us to go from white to red and get them into the Martini red wines; and vice versa for Wente Bros." So we both saw different marketing opportunities in the split. On the other hand, I think we had done business so long together that it was kind of funny to go back out into the marketplace and not be marketing with Carolyn or Mike Martini.

When Carolyn and I would go on the road once or twice a year together, we'd go to various markets, do wine tastings and presentations to the wholesalers, because obviously we were both

in the same wholesale houses. We did travel quite a bit together, and I very much enjoyed being with her. We were a great team, because I'm a morning person and she's a late-night person, so when one of us would start dragging, the other one would pick up. [laughs]

I think we both enjoyed each other. She's still a very good friend, although I don't get to see her that often because we're both so busy.

Teiser: What were some other of the projects that you picked up?

C. Wente: You asked me what the term "marketing" was. I sort of answered it, but marketing to Wente Bros. came under a whole umbrella of things in my job title, which included our retail operations, meaning both of our tasting rooms, one at the estate winery--

Teiser: I've just been over to the one at the estate winery. It's very attractive.

C. Wente: Thank you. I guess it was one of the first tasting rooms, built and opened up back in 1968. We thought at time that it was a very big tasting room [laughs], but nowadays it seems fairly small for the amount of traffic and the popularity that wines have gained, and the fact that people really do like to come out and visit wineries, taste wines, and become more educated. We hope at some point to expand that tasting room and make it a bigger facility.

We opened the sparkling wine cellars tasting room in 1985, and that also fell under my bailiwick--one of the hats I wear. Also at the sparkling wine cellars tasting room we have a conference center, where we began renting rooms for conferences in 1986 and becoming more of a full-service conference center. Today that's just going gangbusters. If you drove up to my house you probably came through the parking lot that was full; they've got a conference going on there today.

Georgine Woodward, who is the facility sales director, has done a tremendous job in booking the facility. I think part of that is marketing Wente Bros. and getting Wente Bros.' name out to the community. Having a lot of people come to a winery to hold a conference is a wonderful thing. They can have a rural setting, it's quiet, they can have their meetings and also have different events like tastings or tours to break up the monotony of their conferences [laughs]. All of that I developed. I have to say that I have tremendous staff who have just been really

the ones who have put it all together. I just get to help them out with it and give them a little guidance.

Creating a Restaurant

C. Wente: The other thing that fell under my area of responsibility was the restaurant. That was a major portion of time and energy during 1985.

Teiser: How did it happen that you decided to undertake that very complex job of creating a restaurant?

C. Wente: You want the real family inside story, or do you want the p.r. version? [laughs] I would say that when we purchased Cresta Blanca winery from Schenley, we had various ideas as to what we were going to do with this property. Finally we decided we wanted to get into the sparkling wine business, and this would be the ideal site to have our sparkling wine cellars--to move the secondary fermentation away from the still wine winery, the estate winery--so that those very active yeasts weren't floating around over there to infect any of our still wines.

We decided to renovate this winery, and one of the nicest buildings on the property was the old Cresta Blanca hospitality house. It was in the best condition. We couldn't quite decide what we were going to do with it. We had taken the old champagne building of Cresta Blanca and turned it into some amount of storage--there are some tunnels that go back in that building itself where we have the sparkling wine *en tirage*--and we decided to make the building itself the tasting room and visitors' center area, and upstairs put the conference center. That left really no need for the hospitality room or a tasting room, so we had this nice little building sitting there.

My brother Phil felt it would be really nice to have a restaurant on the property to showcase great California wines with great California food. There was no other white-tablecloth restaurant in the valley within a half hour or forty-five minutes driving distance. Much like Domaine Chandon was to the Napa Valley, one of the first white-table-cloth restaurants that I think really kicked off the culinary boom that's gone on up there, we felt maybe starting and having the cornerstone placed here in the Livermore Valley with a good restaurant would awaken people to the fact that they didn't have to drive into San Francisco or Oakland or Berkeley to have a good meal.

I said that sounded all fine and dandy and, yes, very visionary; but on the other hand, a restaurant to me was twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and not many of them were successful. They weren't entirely profitable, and did we really want to get into this? Eric, Phil, and I talked about it a great deal and certainly included my mother, who rolled her eyes and wasn't quite sure it was a thing we ought to be getting into. My brother Phil I think lobbied my brother Eric a little bit harder than he lobbied me, and the vote came down two for and one against, me being the one who voted against it, and somehow I got to run it. [laughs]

I think all I knew about the restaurant business was selling wine to restaurants or dining in restaurants. Lord knows, I've dined in restaurants all across the country, in Europe, and the Far East and certainly had a distinct opinion about what kind of restaurant I wanted and what style. But had I ever had any restaurant experience? No. I think we hired some very astute, good people to help develop the restaurant, a good chef, a good general manager, etc. The restaurant business has a high rate of turnover of personnel. Ours is not too different from that, particularly in the top management, but of our wait staff we probably have five or six of the core original waiters that we hired five years ago who are still with us. I think we are stabilizing on the management and the kitchen staff as well, but we've gained a great reputation for what we're doing out here that now attracts top kitchen people and top restaurant management people to want to be out here.

Teiser: Traditionally, kitchen people are temperamental and have short tempers and need a lot of direction. Were you the personnel manager?

C. Wente: Yes, and I guess that was one of the things that in developing it did take a lot of time and patience and understanding. I think I grew exponentially in that area, learning about restaurants, learning about people, and learning how to make a profit. One of the initial things that we had decided when we started in on this restaurant venture was that it was not just to be a p.r. function; it had to stand as its own profit center and either make it or break it. If it was not breaking even or making money, we would close the doors on it; we were not going to fund something that didn't make sense or wasn't profitable.

I've been really pleased with the community's reaction and support. They've all come out and supported the restaurant, and it's been profitable. We've gained some nice awards; within the

first year we were recognized as one of the top one hundred restaurants in the United States in a restaurant book published by Simon & Schuster. The first year we were open, and every year since then, The Wine Spectator has recognized our wine list as being one of the best in the country; they've given us an award of excellence for it.

So I think we've got some really exciting things going on, and it's ever evolving and ever changing, as I think the culinary scene is. You can't say, "I'm here, and I'm staying here." I think in the restaurant business you've always got to be changing and adjusting to what the marketplace is all about. We've certainly changed some food styles, we've changed prices, some presentation. I think we consistently try to work at improving the wine list, broadening our depth. I think we have a fairly good breadth of selections, but it's trying to always keep up with those older vintages and making sure that you lay enough of certain vintages away. We have the luxury, unlike a lot of other restaurants, of having a warehouse where we can store a lot of wine. It's not like being in downtown San Francisco, where your space is very limited. So there are some fortunate things, being out here in the country.

Teiser: Another advantage is that you don't have to buy your own wine.

C. Wente: Well, we do for all of the other wineries, but, yes, for Wente Bros. wines it's a little different.

Teiser: Do you actually make use of some of the produce of your ranching operation?

C. Wente: That was one of the other things that sort of fell under my bailiwick. When we opened the restaurant I was surprised, because I thought fish would be the number one selling item and chicken probably number two, because back in 1986 it was a very health conscious, trendy thing to have lighter, lower cholesterol, and this, that, and the other thing. At our restaurant beef was the number one selling item and lamb was number two. It may have said something for our market out here, but on the other hand, it then led us to the idea that here we had a cattle ranch. We run an approximately two hundred cow-calf operation, and why not select the top calves each year and feed them out and have a natural lean beef, one that is not grain-fed, fatty, hormone-injected, or fed to induce weight gain, and provide our customers with lean, healthful premium beef?

We've been fine-tuning it over the last three years now that we've been actively doing the program, and I think we've gotten it down to a science that works. At one point I was trying to take the entire animal that we slaughtered, use the prime cuts here, and then market the rest of it as hamburger to various restaurants around the Bay Area. Probably the best known would be Perry's in San Francisco; it was using Wente Bros. lean beef. But they were a little bit timid to market it that way on their menu, as having a lean-beef burger, and were not willing to pay the premium for a lean beef, so it may have been a little bit ahead of their time. And it was just the logistics of trying to market hamburger to all the different restaurants.

We have finally gotten down to where we take the primal cuts that we want for the restaurant from the slaughter house, bring them back here and trim them out, and then just sell the rest of the animal to the slaughterhouse right then and there so that we don't have to market the entire animal. That seems to keep our kitchen staff very happy; they love the quality of the beef, and they love the whole concept of having an estate-grown product.

That took us one step further, to the olive trees that we have here on the ranch.

Teiser: Yes, I wondered if they had been there always.

C. Wente: They were planted by Louis Mel. He imported the cuttings from France. His wife had apparently grown up with olive trees on their property in France, so he brought these over and planted them along their driveway up to their house. According to Darrell Corti, who was very helpful on this entire olive oil project, he identified the trees as being the Lucques variety, which I guess in Italian is "Lucca." As far as he knows, we were the only ones who have that variety in California, and you're no longer able to import the cuttings for them.

Teiser: There is a Lucques variety imported from France. Would that have been the one Mel brought?

C. Wente: Yes.

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Teiser: I think the early California Mission olive trees came from Mexico.

C. Wente: What we found through Darrell Corti was that the type of varieties that we had were some Mission and then this Lucques variety that Louis Mel imported. In tracing this back, Charles Wetmore, who was the founder of Cresta Blanca winery, also imported some of these olive cuttings as well. Early ripening Mission, Picholenes, and what they just call Mission are the other three types that we have on our property in addition to the Lucques. Darrell Corti was suggesting that he felt that since Mr. Mel and Mr. Wetmore were such good buddies, they probably exchanged some of these cuttings back and forth.

At any rate, my grandfather had harvested these olives through about the early sixties. I remember as a kid the pickers coming in and picking the trees, but the price of labor for picking olives soon outgrew the revenue we got for selling the olives to Lindsay Olive or whomever during the sixties. The price of olive oil wasn't that high then. I think lately olive oil has taken off again for all its healthful benefits. We thought about whether this would be economical for us to do, and so we gave it a try. The crop just kept coming up, year after year, so all we needed to do was go out and pick it. It wasn't much of an investment [laughs].

Nick Sciabica, with Dan Sciabica and Sons in Modesto, did the custom pressing for us, and he also was very helpful. He and Darrell Corti were there when the olive oil was being pressed, and they were just amazed. I guess that to qualify as an extra-virgin olive oil, the fatty acid has to be less than .20 [two-tenths] of 1 percent, and ours was .01. So we were really excited about it. I think the quality of it is quite good.

To have an extra-virgin olive oil sitting on all your trees all these years, you kind of kick yourself [laughs], but the restaurant staff is thrilled to be able to use it in the restaurant in various presentations. We do a thin-sliced beef that they drizzle some of our olive oil on, with some capers and parmigiano cheese shavings, and it's really quite tasty. And they use it on a pizzetta that they do and on some other things, and we sell it through the tasting rooms at this point. We hope to continue producing it. This last year the crop was very, very light, and we ended up not picking it because it was so light. I think it had to do with the flowering last spring; we had those very late rains that hit the flowers off, so we didn't get a very good set. Also I think the olive trees were impacted by the drought.

Teiser: Do you also manage your advertising program?

C. Wente: Yes, I do, and we do very little advertising. I think, again, that part of our marketing philosophy is that the dollars that we could spend in advertising we could use better in the marketplace supplying point-of-sales tools for the salesmen. Being about a 200,000-case winery in just domestic sales, we don't really have the dollars built into every case to have a national ad campaign. We do a little advertising here and there, but nothing that's "Galloesque."

Appellations and Label Terms

Teiser: At the WITS conference early this year, you were talking about appellations and brand names. How do you rank appellations in connection with brand names?

C. Wente: That's a good question. [laughter] In my opinion the whole vineyard goes from varietal, brand, and appellation, or brand, varietal, appellation. But the concept that I've dealt with most was when the BATF [Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms] came up with this idea of having appellations. Where did we fit in, where did we want to fit in, what were we going to do about it? Because nobody else was going to take the bull by the horns and get something done. Did it have importance to us? Yes, it did, because of other regulations about how you qualified for estate-bottled wines, which virtually all of our wines are. It then became a matter of pedigree, and I think that's all appellations are--a furthering of the pedigree on the label.

Having said that, I think in the past people always recognized a brand name and recognized the style of wines that you made. Today the consumer might have a little bit different perspective, because Napa Valley is a buzz word to them. I think the example I used at the WITS conference was if you were to go out and stop somebody on the street and say, "Could you name five appellations in France?" They could probably name five of the gross or large appellations, like Chablis, Burgundy (two easy ones), Champagne, Bordeaux. They might even get Loire, or they might even go down to some smaller ones like Medoc on down. But if you were to ask that same person whether he could name five California appellations, I bet you they could name Napa Valley, and they might be able to name Sonoma, but I'm

not sure they know Stag's Leap, Carneros, Monterey, Livermore Valley, Arroyo Seco, San Luis Obispo.

So in my mind the appellation system here still hasn't really developed enough. It's in its infancy, and I know the BATF is trying to fine-tune it even more. But I feel there is a lot that can be done in that area and that we have the potential here in the Livermore Valley or with an appellation that we're proposing now, called the San Francisco Bay appellation, to be that third appellation in the consumer's mind that they could name beyond Napa or Sonoma. San Francisco Bay has an immediate connotation as to where it is for most consumers, and it is easily recognizable and therefore I think a very important concept for the wineries and vineyards that surround the Bay, and one that we are spearheading and pushing very hard.

Teiser: This reminds me that you, I believe, were instrumental in getting BATF to recognize "estate"--

C. Wente: --and "vintner-grown"--

Teiser: --for non-contiguous properties.

C. Wente: Right. [laughs] Wente Bros. has vineyards here in the Livermore Valley and in Monterey County. We grew grapes in Monterey, but our winery was in Livermore, two hours north, which precluded us from using the term "estate-bottled" on the label. That, to me, was a little bit frustrating, because it was the same thing as growing our grapes here in Livermore and crushing them here and making the wines. What we were trying to do was get a term that the BATF would accept as recognizing that the vintner grew his own grapes and produced them without being in the same area of appellation.

What we presented was the term called "vintner-grown," which virtually read the same as "estate-grown." It's just that the winery did not have to be contiguous to the vineyards. Subsequent to that, the Central Coast appellation came into being, and our Monterey vineyards and our Livermore Valley vineyards are within the Central Coast appellation, so we can still use the term "estate-bottled," which, again, speaks to the confusion that goes on with all this appellation stuff. Therefore I go back to a consumer walking into the store, and probably their first thought is, "Do I want red or white?" If they decide on white, then, "What variety am I looking for? Do I want Chenin Blanc? Do I want Sémillon? Do I want Sauvignon Blanc? Oh, let's see; I'm going to have some fish, so I'll do Sauvignon Blanc." Okay, they walk over to the Sauvignon Blanc

section and see a variety of labels. Then it's brand, or it's price. I think that's the next thing that comes into play; I don't think it's necessary to put the pedigree on the label. It may get down to that, but I think it's probably more price-driven or what they've heard of as a label. So I think the brand importance becomes significant.

Pricing

Teiser: Is your price structure changing, or have you achieved a level, or do you conceive a level where it will land?

C. Wente: I think that's a good question. We're evolving, as is the entire industry. I don't think $2.99 wines are going to be around. It's such a competitive end of the business, and nobody's making any money in it. Everybody's moving up pricewise in the industry. As I said, back in 1980 the majority of our sales were in Grey Riesling and Le Blanc de Blancs. Today our number one selling wine, which we probably do eighty to a hundred thousand cases of, is Chardonnay. We have two tiers of that Chardonnay, one of which is our estate brand, which is the more moderately priced, probably selling for around $7.99 a bottle. Then we have a reserve Chardonnay at $15 to $18, depending on the vineyard and the year.

I think, as I said earlier, we look at always moving towards that super-premium, ultra-premium end, because I think we feel our vineyards and the backbone of our business has always been on the premium side. I think my father always pushed towards that, and certainly my great-uncle Herman always pushed towards the quality end, coming up with the varietal labeling. And my grandfather selected out what he felt his favorite clones were. I think all of their efforts went towards producing the best wines possible in California. I think that's where our heritage and tradition are, and we want to continue Wente Bros. in that direction. Price points, I think, will always keep pushing upwards.

Champagne

Teiser: Where are you positioning your champagne, say vis-à-vis Schramsberg and Domaine Chandon?

C. Wente: The champagne for us has been, quite frankly, a struggle. I think most people think of Wente Bros. as a still-wine winery, and producing both a sparkling wine and a still wine, we've had a hard time getting recognition for the sparkling wine. Most people don't right off the top of their head think of Wente and champagne. Our positioning for it has been around Domaine Chandon and Piper Sonoma--in that category--and I think we will continue that positioning. We use what we feel are the top grape varieties--Chardonnay, Pinot noir and Pinot blanc--for our cuvée. We age it probably longer than anybody in our *méthode champenoise* category on the yeast--four-plus years--and I think the product is really superior.

Again, it's been a struggle, because when you go into a wholesale house you have an opportunity to sell maybe one or two things, and you have to tell that wholesaler what those one or two things are that you want them to be pushing. In today's business, it's not like Wente Bros. twenty years ago, where we had fifteen or eighteen different wines and had to be all things to all wholesalers because they didn't have a lot of other wineries to fill those gaps. Today most of the wineries have a very narrow line of wines that they produce, and they say, "My number one priority is Chardonnay, my number two priority is champagne, and my number three priority is Cabernet." That's Jordan, for instance. The wholesaler is going to say, "I'll pick number one and push that and get behind you on that one, but I'm going to give somebody else the number two spot on champagne; I'm going to give that to Schramsberg or Wente." So the market is so crowded that the wholesaler is not going to work on your whole line, and our bigger push has been on our still wines rather than our sparkling wines. You look at somebody like Korbel [F. Korbel & Brosx], who got out of the still wine business because they recognized what their core business was, and that's champagne. I'm not saying that Wente Bros. is going to get out of the sparkling wine business, but I think we're certainly de-emphasizing it in terms of our list of priorities. Still wines are our backbone, and we're going to stick with them.

Teiser: We should speak about your export program. It sounds interesting--glamorous.

C. Wente: Actually, Eric is the one who's instrumental in the export program. My father started it up, and then Eric and Larry DiPietro, who has managed the Canadian sales for many years now. Then Eric hired John Schwartz, who is now our export director, to take over the bulk of what Eric was doing on exports. John has really done some fascinating things: getting us to be the

first [United States] wine in Russia, and most recently to be the first sold in Poland. He's really done some great things, but Eric would know more about that.

Teiser: Are there any other things you've done with the BATF?

C. Wente: My only contact with BATF has truly been through the appellation system. My mother and I worked very closely on the Livermore Valley appellation, on amending the Central Coast appellation to include the Livermore Valley, and to write the Arroyo Seco appellation. So we've been involved with three appellations at this point, and we're working on our fourth, which is the San Francisco Bay appellation.

Teiser: Are you involved in labels? I know you changed labels recently.

C. Wente: Label approval has always been fairly routine. I basically feel the BATF is a fairly cooperative, supportive regulatory arm of the wine industry and has been willing to listen to what the wine industry's problems are.

Owners, Managers, and Employees

Teiser: You mentioned just now that you had been at an executive committee meeting. What is the executive committee?

C. Wente: [laughs] Essentially I guess it's how Wente Bros. works. My brother Eric is president of the winery, my brother Philip is executive vice president, and I'm vice president. I suppose in a family business none of us truly feels that the titles are that important, but that you need to have them in a corporate sense. People who work for a family, at least in our family, understand that they will probably never get to be president of the winery, but we have a vice president of production, a vice president of national accounts, et cetera.

Everybody has responsibilities for certain areas, but the executive committee takes our senior management people and talks about the direction of Wente Bros. So we get input from our managers, and it's not just a top-down decision-making process; we try to take their expertise and assimilate it into our vision and our plans and have them participate in where they think Wente Bros. ought to be going. Yes, it is 100 percent owned by the family, and it is a family concern, but we feel our managers have a lot of input and ideas that we take heed to.

Teiser: Are they actually members of the executive committee?

C. Wente: Yes, they are, and they are voting members. We have our chief financial officer, our production manager, our vice president of our Western and California division for sales, and our national sales manager for Parrott & Co. who sit on the executive committee, and then there are Eric, Philip, and myself. So there are seven of us, I guess.

Teiser: Do you have a corporate board?

C. Wente: Yes, we have a board of directors, which consists of my mother, my two brothers and myself, and our chief financial officer, Gary Ventling. We have regular board meetings, but I would say that the board meetings are probably more of a reflection of what comes out of the executive committee meetings, and it's more of a reporting function.

Teiser: I've talked with a number of people who are involved in family corporations, and most had some guiding principles. When they had a meeting and couldn't agree on something, they would have some rules of action. If you disagree, what happens?

C. Wente: That's an interesting question. In the past, before we established an executive committee, it was the family, and it came down to a family vote. Generally the family always voted in one direction (with the exception of the restaurant; I was being a little tongue-in-cheek about the two-to-one vote on it), probably because my two brothers and I grew up together and my mom was instrumental in raising us--those are the four owners of Wente Bros. We all have the same goals and values and understanding of where we want to go and what we want to do. It's not to say that we all march in locked step together and that there aren't some different ideas or discussions, but that we all talk about it and mutually agree that that is the direction we want to go. I can't think of any time where somebody just adamantly slammed their fist down on the desk and said, "No, I don't want to be a part of it," or, "I don't agree with this," or whatever. We all logically discuss it and talk through it, and we all become believers in what we're going to do or we probably wouldn't go forward with it.

With the institution of the executive committee, which has been a year or more now, there are things that we bring to a vote, but virtually everybody votes in the same direction anyway because we will have hashed out or heard everybody's reasonings behind it. I can't think of anything that somebody feels so

strongly about that they don't go along with it. I don't mean to make it sound like the executive committee is ineffective. All I'm saying is that I think maybe it's because we have good communication and we all have common understanding of goals, and/or we input in such a way that we do initiate whatever that person is saying. People are responsible for their own areas, and therefore we probably take what they say as what ought to be done.

I think we must all talk it through enough that everybody eventually agrees to the logic, or it's modified to be a plan of action that everybody can agree upon. Maybe that's the way we work it out; we compromise enough, and whatever the compromise is, it works for us.

You know, I think to have the same values really does say something. But that's not to say Willy Joslin always agrees with what Philip has to say, or that Gary Ventling has to agree with me.

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C. Wente: If they don't participate in it, then where are you going to be? They're your chief people. I think that's why we have been as successful as we have been, because we've got good people who work with us and believe in what we're doing.

Teiser: Many of them have been with you for a long time, haven't they?

C. Wente: Yes. Gary Ventling is probably the newest comer in the management staff, and he came from Chateau St. Jean about 1988, after they were purchased by the Japanese. He's been a great asset to the winery on the financial side. Willy Joslin came to Wente Bros. in 1975 or '76 with Eric. They had known each other at Davis. Larry DiPietro has been with us since 1975. This is the new generation of management that has come in, which was not picked by my father or my grandfather but by Eric, Phil, Jean, and my grandfather, certainly at that time.

Then we have all of the "older generation" (they probably wouldn't appreciate me saying that), like Bruno Canziani, who is in our tasting room but who used to be the cellarmaster for my uncle Herman and my dad; and Cecil Aguirre, who was vineyard manager for my grandfather. They're still with us. Elbert Kirkman, who used to be the office manager, now works in the tasting room part time. These people have been with us forty, fifty, fifty-five years.

We don't have a lot of new hires; we have a lot of long-term employees, and it's nice. It's nice not to have the turnover. As I said, the greatest turnover has been in the restaurant, and that was something very new to me, to have that kind of turnover. I couldn't believe that somebody would work for you for six months and then move on to another restaurant. It was just inconceivable: "You mean you're not here for life? What's the matter with you?" [laughs]

Public Events

Teiser: I think you've discussed the developments since 1980 except your public participation programs.

C. Wente: There are a couple of things we've done in that area. One is our summer concert series, and this will be the fourth or fifth season.

Teiser: Who manages those?

C. Wente: Donna Wilcox started the first one when she was over here at the sparkling wine cellars. They still fall under my umbrella of responsibilities, but Georgine Woodward, who is our facilities sales director, manages the concert series now and has for three years running. She helps book the acts and then coordinates all the labor, set-up, production crew, and is in charge of all the ticket sales. She really does an excellent job. We get 1,200 people per concert, and I think it's really been a nice thing to gain more exposure for what we're doing out here. It has certainly heightened the awareness of the sparkling wine cellars, which was a new facility when we started up with the summer music series, and now more and more people know about it. That's been a really good program for us.

The other thing was a result of the centennial celebration that Donna Wilcox and I put together. The next year it sort of evolved into what we call the Livermore Valley Harvest Celebration. That's held on Labor Day weekend. That's gone from the first year that we did it, where we had maybe three or four thousand people and didn't spend any money on publicizing it, to fifteen thousand people and a yearly event that has become the fund raiser for the Livermore Valley Winegrowers Association. In the first year the Wine Institute had the regional representatives council, the Livermore Valley was the third organization in terms of the amount of funding that we

got. We got matching funds from the California Winegrowers Association through the marketing order. Napa got number one and Sonoma number two, but Livermore, with nine little wineries, got somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty thousand dollars because of the amount of money that we raised as a non-profit organization through the harvest celebration for promoting the Livermore Valley and raising funds for the Livermore Valley Wine Museum and that kind of thing.

It is our major fundraising thing now. We don't have the number of wineries to assess dues to get matching funds to publicize the area, but I think it's really been a good event for us to bring people in, and it's certainly a wine education event.

We do what we call Christmas Wine Trails, which is the first weekend in December. That's a valley-wide winery event. It's at the time of year that we're pruning the vines, so one of the fun things we do here at the sparkling wine cellars is that we'll bring a lot of the cuttings over. People come and make their own Christmas wreaths out of the vine cuttings and really enjoy that--give them as presents.

Other programs that we do here are barrel tasting on Presidents' weekend and Art in the Vineyard, which is a fifteen-year-old event with the Livermore Valley Art Association. We do small valley events that attract people to the wineries.

Teiser: Who handles those?

C. Wente: My tasting room managers usually execute those.

Wente Land and Cattle Company

Teiser: You are vice president of Wente Land and Cattle Company. Does that mean--?

C. Wente: That means that my brother Phil is president, and I'm vice president, and there you have it. [laughter] We get a lot of business done at our board meetings. We usually do them on horseback. As I said earlier, I grew up riding every weekend that I can remember. My brothers went away to college, and I became my grandfather's right-hand cowhand and virtually rode every weekend for him or after school if he needed me; if there was a sick cow or a calf or something, I'd get them in, and I'd

get up before school and go feed with him. So there were various things that involved the cattle company. Now, other than the pleasure side, I'd say I don't do that much, because we have a ranch manager who does that.

Teiser: How much land have you involved in--

C. Wente: We have approximately two thousand acres in the cattle ranch, and we run a cow-calf operation. We also purchased some steers and feed them out here. We figured that it takes about seven to ten acres per cow-calf unit to feed them year-round.

Teiser: As I drove along, admiring these beautiful hills, I was wondering if some day you were going to have terraces full of grapes.

C. Wente: We actually were talking about that this morning--terracing the north side of the hills for cooler vineyards. As I said earlier, I think there is a tremendous potential for the Livermore Valley for growth of vineyards and wineries. You just have to ask whether it's economic to plant new vineyards, and can you make a profit off of them? What is the real estate value of the valley going to be? How is it preserved? What is the board of supervisors' agricultural direction going to be? Where does the South Livermore Valley fit into the general plan scheme? Those are all issues that are certainly hanging fire, but there is a lot of developable vineyard land around here. It's probably not at the price that the Napa Valley is at right now, and the vineyards are just as good. That's what the future is going to bring.

Teiser: Maybe by the time you make a decision, there will be some equipment for handling vineyard terraces.

C. Wente: Wouldn't that be great?

Work with the Wine Institute and Other Organizations

Teiser: You mentioned your Livermore winemakers' group. You've done some things with the Wine Institute, too. You've been on a committee there, haven't you?

C. Wente: Yes. I guess I started out just being a member of the p.r. committee when it was in existence. Then I became chairman of what was the community relations committee, which was to help

develop or recognize what was going on in various communities with regard to viticulture and winemaking, particularly the urban pressures side of it. That committee went by the wayside in the reorganization of the Wine Institute, and last year I was asked to be co-chairman with John Culbertson for a group called the Wine Ambassadors, which was to train a group of industry representatives to go around to speak, representing the entire wine industry--not to represent just Wente Bros. or Wente Bros. point of view, but the wine industry's point of view, to get the good things out about wine--the healthful side, the economic side, all the positive things that aren't being said about wine in the papers.

We've had some success there. Due to funding and changes going on at the Institute, I think we're in a little bit of a hiatus as to what's going to happen with it. When we had the opportunity, or when they come across something at the Institute where they need spokesmen, there is this group that is willing to go out and spend some time doing it.

My brother Phil is probably the one who has been the most active in the Wine Institute. Eric was in the health and social issues area, but he quit that two years ago, and somehow Phil got nominated as the next chairman, so he took it over from Eric and is still very active in it.

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Teiser: You've been active in the local chamber of commerce, is that right?

C. Wente: Yes, I was. When I first came back and started working at the winery, I was very active in the local chamber and was on the board of directors for them. Then, as I became increasingly more involved at the winery and traveling more, I got off the chamber board because it was hard to tell when I was going to be in town and when I wasn't. So I no longer am involved with them. I'm on several other boards: the American Institute of Wine & Food; I'm a director here in the San Francisco chapter and was secretary the last two years, and I've now passed that on to Monica Scotto. I'm involved with the new Les Dames de Escoffier group here in northern California and am treasurer of that.

I consider those fairly industry-related organizations, and outside of them I'm on the Stanford University Friends of Radiology, which is probably one of my father's legacies, to keep involved with the cancer research going on over there.

Currently I'm chairman of an event for the American Diabetes Association, a fund raiser for them in San Francisco. I'm on the Washington Performing Arts Society Board back in Washington, D.C. Those are some of the community things that I'm doing in my spare time. [laughs]

Teiser: I don't know how you have had time to lie in bed.[2] You have been using your computer?

C. Wente: Yes, I have it right here, and I just set it up and type away.

Teiser: I pulled out of my file this November 30, 1990, article from The Wine Spectator that you undoubtedly remember. How do you think the article turned out?

C. Wente: I guess my feeling about it was that it was the first time The Wine Spectator has ever done an article on Wente Bros., and they took a fairly broad brush stroke of where we are. In my opinion it was probably not as upbeat as I would have liked to have seen it, considering all the things we are doing and all the contributions that we've made to the wine industry. But I think the Spectator's reporting is generally more investigative and that they need to provide what they feel is a balanced story and not a p.r. puff piece. I always like the p.r. puff pieces [laughs], being the p.r. gal that I am. But I think overall it was fairly straightforward: "These are all the things that the Wente family is doing." The one thing they seemed to me to be saying was that we weren't particularly focused, and I think we are all very focused and tremendously dedicated. Where there's a will there's a way, and we certainly have it, I think.

Teiser: How long had the author, Steve Heimoff, known you?

C. Wente: He'd met us once and spent the day with us.

Teiser: Is there anything we should add?

C. Wente: No, I think I probably said more than you ever wanted to hear. In talking to my brothers you will certainly get a more rounded picture of the entire Wente operation and their activities, particularly on the winemaking side and the vineyard side. I think that's probably the one nice thing about it, that we all have our fit in the organization, and we all respect each other and the job that each of us does but keep abreast of what the other persons are doing and feel free to speak out about it. We

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[2]She had had a back operation.

don't get offended by a person's statement but consider it as good, positive input.

I just hope we can continue doing what we're doing so that Eric's and Phil's kids, and my kids if they come along, all have the opportunity to make the choice that we did--if they want to be a part of the business or not. Back to the family lessons, that was something my parents were able to do, to allow us to make the choice. We all chose that this was a lifestyle and a business that we wanted to be in and feel very strongly about.

[following portion added by telephone on April 29, 1991]

Teiser: Can you say again what you told me after your interview about your brothers at the time of your father's death?

C. Wente: My brother Eric was twenty-five at the time, and Philip was twenty-four. They both had to step in and take an incredible load and put their arms around the business and go forward with it. I think Eric and Phil both just really rose to the occasion, and they were interesting in how they worked together. Eric is probably one of the most incredibly smart individuals that you'd ever want to meet, conservative, and thinks things through carefully. Philip is equally smart but very visionary about where he feels the winery should be going. They're a nice combination and a nice balance. I think I find myself somewhere in between the two, and I think that's what makes the three of us a nice working combination.

Teiser: I believe you said one of the brothers stepped in first to take over the leadership at your father's death, and the other--

C. Wente: They were both working at the winery when my dad died, and Eric stepped in and became president. I think Philip was supportive of that. We all sit around and often ask if it's just because of age, Eric being the oldest and then Philip and myself, that we should, in the old Germanic sense, have the eldest be president. I think the three of us are comfortable with our titles and our roles, but somebody has to be the final decision-maker or push the other two to make decisions, and I think it's set up really well.

Teiser: I thank you very much.

PHILIP R. WENTE

Born in Livermore in 1952, Philip R. Wente was educated in the local schools before going to the University of California at Davis. There he took courses in enology and viticulture and earned a degree in agricultural science and management. He then joined the family enterprise, where he had worked at many tasks during his school years. In 1977, following the death of his father, Karl L. Wente, he assumed responsibility for agricultural operations, subsequently becoming executive vice president of Wente Bros.

He was interviewed in his office at the Wente Bros. estate winery.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Philip Robinson Wente

Date of birth 11-11-52 Birthplace Livermore

Father's full name Karl Laird Wente

Occupation Winegrower Birthplace Livermore

Mother's full name Jean Paige Robinson Wente

Occupation Winegrower Birthplace Corcoran

Your spouse Julie Ann Fagan Wente

Your children Jordan Paige Wente
Alycia Marie Wente

Where did you grow up? Livermore

Present community Livermore

Education Livermore Public Schools
University Calif. Davis B.S.

Occupation(s) Winegrower - Executive Vice President
Wente Bros.

Areas of expertise Viticulture, Public Policy, Marketing,
Blending

Other interests or activities Skiing, Tennis, Golf, Art.
Team Sports, Wine Collecting

Organizations in which you are active Bohemian Club, Wine Institute,
ACFC&WCD Zone 7,

Philip Wente, circa 1990

INTERVIEW WITH PHILIP R. WENTE

GROWING UP IN THE LIVERMORE AREA, 1952-1970

Interview 1: June 3, 1991]##

Teiser: Where were you born and when, Phil?

Philip Wente: I was born here in Livermore, California, on November 11, 1952.

Teiser: Where did you live as you were growing up?

P. Wente: I lived right down the road from the winery here on the old Louis Mel Ranch where my father lived--4725 Tesla Road--until I left for college.

Teiser: What was it like growing up in a wine family at that period?

P. Wente: I think I went through several different periods of the industry, being born in 1952. My recollections go back to when I was about three, maybe 1955, and particularly starting school. There was no particular romance to the wine business, as far as I could tell back then. You were almost more popular if your father was a cattle rancher or a vegetable farmer than a vineyardist. I think the winegrowing business wasn't up on the type of pedestal it seems to have placed itself today.

So going to school, 90 percent or 99 percent of the kids had never heard of Wente Bros., had no idea there was grape growing or winemaking in this valley, and in the early or mid-fifties the valley was substantially a larger wine growing district than it is today, with Cresta Blanca being a very large winery at the time. There were maybe five or six thousand acres of vineyards here up until Cresta Blanca closed up in the mid-

sixties, and then we went downhill from there. Until the early eighties we went down to the low of probably twelve to fifteen hundred acres of vineyards.

Even graduating from high school, most kids didn't know anything about Wente Bros. or the fact that there was wine growing in the valley, so it wasn't as if it were a huge influential part of my life in terms of social interaction. There were no other kids going to school whose fathers were winemakers. The Concannon kids were maybe a half a generation off, so I really didn't know any of their children. There were no other winemaking families going to school, so there I didn't have friends who were winemakers. There was no social interaction, and there was no wine growing society like there is in Napa or Sonoma--or at least perceived in Napa or Sonoma--and that type of thing.

I think from the early sixties on, the Lawrence [Livermore] National Laboratory probably dominated Livermore as the main employer, and 20, 30, 40 percent of parents of the kids in school worked there. I'm just generalizing figures.

Teiser: What about your family life? Did that incline you to an interest in wine growing?

P. Wente: Yes. I'd say I had a very strong family life. Also, living in a rural situation, it pretty much removes you from the neighborhood type of play, so when you came home your family was everything rather than going down the street and playing with the kids next door. Pretty much what we did after school and on weekends was all family oriented, and my family life had a tremendous effect on my view of the world and what I enjoy doing.

My grandfather, as you know from past conversations, was very interested not only in the wine business but also in the cattle business and regularly enlisted our services to help him run his cattle operation. He provided us horses to ride at an early age, and also the American trend towards the West was fairly strong in those years, so we all grew up wanting to be cowboys and farmers as well.

Teiser: Did you have duties?

P. Wente: We had fairly regular duties, once we got to a reasonable age. I think from eleven years on I was employed every summer by the family in the business doing one form of work or another. I started off at fifty cents an hour when I was eleven years old.

I remember that quite clearly. I was very impressed with working nine hours and earning four dollars and fifty cents. [laughs]

Teiser: Did your work make you want to do more of it?

P. Wente: Even though the work was very menial labor--hoeing weeds and picking up rocks and things like that--I always liked it. There was just enough tractor driving and horseback riding and other things thrown in to spice it up. I never looked at it as drudgery; I looked at it basically as part of life and the responsibility that you do. I kind of enjoyed it. It was something to do, and the interaction with the other workers was fun.

Teiser: Did you enjoy working with your father?

P. Wente: Yes, I did enjoy working with my dad. I spent a lot more time, actually, working with my grandfather than my father in terms of the physical sense. My father was really rather busy on so many different fronts that at best he was the supervisorial type who assigned you your jobs for the day or the week. Then you might see him again in a couple of days to have him come around to check up and see how you were doing. Whereas I would physically go out and work with my grandfather, building fences or driving cattle or branding or round-ups or whatever. He was actually directly hands-on involved, and he had more time to come around and check on you every day when you were working out in the vineyards or in the winery. He'd always stick his nose in every day to see how you were doing.

And I had probably a much closer working interaction with Cecil Aguirre, who was our ranch foreman here. He started in 1959, I believe. He was the cellarmaster to the Charles Krug winery. My dad recruited him to come and work for us, originally in the winery. Then he took over our agricultural operations here in Livermore as general manager and foreman for my father and grandfather. So he was really directly our boss whenever we were working in the field, and he was a wonderful man to work for with a great understanding of the mind-set of a young man and how to get the most out of him.

Wente Bros. Employees

Teiser: As I remember, you have a tradition of good employees in this family winery.

P. Wente: I certainly always felt that way.

Teiser: Do they stay a long time?

P. Wente: Yes. Cecil is still with us, as an example. Bruno Canziani and Elbert Kirkman, who started here in the early thirties, are still with us on a part-time basis, although limited. They've been with us for fifty-seven years, and Cecil's been with us more than thirty years now. Willy Joslin, our winemaker, who started with us in 1977 after the death of my father, has been a very loyal and outstanding employee.

Ralph Riva ran our Arroyo Seco vineyard operations; we purchased the ranch from his father, Alfred Riva. Ralph was going to Cal Poly [California Polytechnic Institute] at the time, and my father asked him to take a few courses in viticulture and think about whether he'd like to come back and work for us. He thought that was a great idea, so he came back in the mid sixties--I think it was '64 or '65 when he got out of college--and he's been with us ever since. Now he's vice president [in charge] of our vineyard operations.

Teiser: Is he here in the Livermore Valley, too?

P. Wente: Yes, he's overseeing all our agricultural vineyard operations at this time, along with Arturo Chavez, who has also been with us since about 1965. Keith Roberts now oversees our Arroyo Seco vineyard and has been with us for fifteen years or more.

Robert Detjens was a wonderful long-term employee. Unfortunately he passed away early from heart problems. He was also a recruit of my father out of Fresno State [College] and Cal Poly back about the same time as Ralph Riva; he was a contemporary of Ralph Riva. His family owns a vineyard over here in Livermore; the Detjens vineyard was the old Belle View Winery of the Duvall fame that Ernest spoke of in his previous conversations.[1] Robert was really a dedicated employee as well.

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[1]See Ernest Wente's interview, pp. 9-10.

Teiser: In the family-owned wineries I've talked to, there's often a problem--that you seemed to have solved--because an employee knows he can never be at the top, and he has to be willing to assume he'll have a good position but no ownership position. Does that come up ever?

P. Wente: I think that is potentially still always a problem, especially for an individual who's particular dream would be to own his own business. However, I guess with the top managers we've had, it seems to have been satisfied by the fact that they have substantial responsibility and feel as though they're part of the family. I guess that's the way I would put it as much as anything. I believe that if we can make people feel as though they're as much a part of the family as the family itself, then maybe there's some satisfaction in that.

Another long-time employee of ours is Lawrence DiPietro, who Eric and I went to school with ever since about the fourth grade. He's actually Eric's age and graduated from college at the same time Eric did. My father recruited him, from when he used to work here summers as a teenager with Eric and me, to be our business manager and controller. He's now our national sales manager.

Bruce Hunter is another long-time employee. He is the president of Parrott & Co. and started with us in '73.

I guess what we've tried to do more recently to formalize some of these things is to put together what we call a management committee and have these people be a very active part of that management committee. In fact, they could go so far as to have the majority vote over the family if they felt there was a particular way the company should be going other than the way that the family sees it. So we've gone so far as to share that much of the management responsibility.

Teiser: Let's get back to your early years. You went to school here in Livermore, did you?

P. Wente: Yes, Livermore Grammar School and Livermore High School, and I graduated in 1970.

Teiser: Did you at that time have any career ideas?

P. Wente: I think I did, and they mostly came back to the family business. I think there is something very special about the way parents can raise you to not--my parents never made any statements that I was expected to work for the family or that they wished I

would, or any other such thing. It was always just kind of a given. There was no particular moment in my life when I said, "This is what I'm going to do," or, "This is not what I'm going to do." I just grew up loving my life and loving my family and loving what I always thought I was going to do. I wanted to be just like my father and just like my grandfather, and I never had any other aspirations.

I think the fine line that parents have to walk in order to make you toe the line, at the same time not being so heavy-handed that they drive you away, is a real secret to a family staying together, or a family business--

Teiser: You are lucky in the continuity in your family--.

P. Wente: The family has certainly had its ups and downs in terms of the number of offspring in each generation. Certainly in Ernest's generation it was only Ernest and Hilma having any children out of the seven or eight children of that generation. I think that was very unusual, and then the fact that Ernest only had one child, which was my father, Karl, was probably somewhat unusual, too. The fact that Herman passed away early and Karl passed away early was unfortunate in terms of the loss of the resources that they could have brought to the family.

Teiser: But you boys were already working by the time your father died?

P. Wente: Right. Eric started, I think, in 1973, working for the company, and I started in 1974. My father passed away in early '77, so we had two or three years but also, more than that, all of the summers and weekends working with them. The exact technical detail of what you did every day in terms of working was no mystery. I think what we really missed was the big world picture--the long-range planning or view of where the industry was going, and the late seventies was such a critical time in the industry.

THE WINE INDUSTRY IN THE 1970s

P. Wente: It was really the transitional time from the rather small, family-oriented industry, where still in 1977 there were only twenty or thirty wineries that anybody even cared about, to literally in five years the industry exploding to five to seven hundred wineries.

Teiser: There was that slump in '75, wasn't there?

P. Wente: There was a little slump. It was a slump that we never really noticed. Wente Bros. at that time was really on top of the world in terms of premium wineries. We were probably the most respected white wine producer. Robert Mondavi was not a factor even at that time, and families like Louis Martini and the older wineries, even though they were corporate--Beaulieu and Inglenook--were still having a very strong reputation. Paul Masson and Almaden were still considered premium wineries in those days. They've almost faded from the picture now in terms of just being labels and not associated with any particular facility anymore. But they used to make a whole range of premium wines. The Mirassous were quite a factor at that time. The Jordons, the Far Nientes, and the Sonoma Cutrers of the world didn't even exist, and Robert Mondavi was just having his first successes with his Fumé Blanc and his Cabernet and wasn't even a factor in producing Chardonnay, as far as I can remember, at that time.

Teiser: I remember your grandfather saying (I can't remember exactly how he phrased it; I'm not quoting him accurately) that there was no other industry he knew of that had so many amateurs come into it. He was speaking of Smith and others earlier. Then I believe they dropped out.

P. Wente: Those cycles have come around two or three times. There's no product in the world that has been as romanticized for thousands

of years; even two thousand years before the time of Christ wine was romanticized and revered. There's no other consumer product that I can think of in the world that has worldwide organizations where people pay money to belong, strictly to enjoy wine. It is an incredibly unique industry in that way.

The only other farming industry in California that probably is even remotely like that is the cattle business, which has attracted romantic investors off and on, or the horse-breeding business. Just for the pure romance of owning a cattle ranch or a horse farm or horse racing, people invest in it literally to watch their money go down the drain, just because they enjoy being associated with it. The wine business is a lot like that.

Well, I think that particular total romantic era has started on a decline again. The people who are getting into the wine business are looking at the bottom line much stronger. The romance as an attraction to get into the business is still there, but the people who are getting into the business are very hard-nosed about making money, as opposed to the movie stars and the business and corporate executives who just have a lot of money and only want to own a winery for the sheer enjoyment of drinking their own product with their name on it and living in the Napa Valley or Sonoma County.

Monterey County

Teiser: In Monterey County, of course, you had that phenomenal tax advantage for investors. I don't suppose it affected you directly there, but there was a lot of money put into Monterey County vineyards at one time.

P. Wente: It did have a direct effect on us in terms of how it affected the industry as a whole and the reputation of Monterey County at the same time. A lot of people related back to the Bank of America report that came out in the early seventies claiming that the wine industry was a wonderful opportunity for investment due to all the tax advantages and what they viewed as the unlimited growth potential when looking at the European consumption figures versus the United States consumption figures.[1] All these rosy outlooks we've all since learned never existed in a puritanical society like we exist in. I think it

[1]Bank of America, San Francisco, California Wine Outlook, a 20-page pamphlet published in September 1973.

was a great underestimation of the social structure of the United States. It is not Mediterranean in any way, shape, or form. It is very much northern European and very staid and conservative in its viewpoints.

All those things have since come to light, but at the same time Monterey County got caught in a vineyard explosion expansion. It exploded Sonoma and Napa as well. Napa in 1965 was only about twelve thousand acres of vineyards. I'm not sure if my figure is exactly right; it may have been only eight thousand acres of vineyards at that time. Maybe we should call it ten [thousand] for average. It's exploded up to some thirty or forty thousand acres today. Monterey County did the same thing. I think they've reached thirty-seven or thirty-eight thousand acres.

Teiser: But Monterey went from almost nothing.

P. Wente: From nothing in '62 to that level, and it was badly misplanted with the wrong varieties in the wrong areas. The wines had no home. The great Monterey Vineyard Winery experiment itself staggered and failed two or three different times until it was picked up by Coca Cola. Then it became Taylor California Cellars, and the whole push there was to low-end quality, and there was no upper-end ringleader for Monterey County. The other main supporters there were Paul Masson and Almaden, who were also going to the same swing in terms of moving away from the premium area and going more towards the popular-priced area.

With the wrong varietals and the wrong type of promotion, Monterey really took a dive for a number of years. It became a rather suspect area in terms of the more elite restaurateurs and retailers in the country, in that the Monterey appellation carried no significant advantage in terms of marketing, which was very important for wineries like Wente Bros., Mirassou, Jekel, Ventana, Chalone, and a number of others. That's one of the reasons why, when the BATF put together their new appellation regulations, we all applied for different appellations, such as Arroyo Seco, Pinnacles, Chalone, and a variety of other ones, in order to get away from the Monterey County name--

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P. Wente: --until the name of the region could be stabilized. I think we have long since turned the corner on that. Monterey still has a very romantic, beautiful image in most people's minds, having to do with the cities of Monterey and Carmel, and it's a very outstanding and marketable name again. In fact, it is

commanding one of the highest prices in the industry for Chardonnay, Rieslings, Gewürztraminer, and a number of other varietals. All the wineries again are very proud to use the name Monterey as an appellation. I think it really has the potential to be the second or third most recognized appellation in California, but I think it would be somewhat difficult for anybody to think they are going immediately to unseat Napa as number one in the near future.

Sonoma has a lot of divisiveness within its rather large appellation, with a lot of different sub-appellations and a lot of different promotional groups that want to see Alexander Valley, Dry Creek, Russian River, Sonoma Valley, or any number of sub-appellations promoted in their particular county, as opposed to a uniform appellation promotion. I think Monterey has gone back to the origins of that appellation, really getting after promoting Monterey itself, so they're on the rise. A long answer to a short question.

Teiser: I think the stability that you have represented has undoubtedly contributed considerably. Too bad about the Jekel winery.

P. Wente: It remains to be seen what happens there. I think Vintech's idea of putting together a consortium of wine brands was a good one. I don't know really that much about the inside workings of that whole deal, but it appears they were just undercapitalized. I think Jekel will get back on its feet in one form or another, because the vineyards are really some of the most outstanding vineyards in the Monterey area.[2] Wente Bros. bought grapes from Jekel for a number of years before he started his winery and brand, and I always thought they were some of the best grapes in the county.

University and Career Interests

Teiser: To get back to the chronology here, was it more or less a foregone conclusion that you would go to Davis?

P. Wente: No, I don't think so at all. Everybody else in the family had gone to Stanford [except Ernest]. There was only one year separating Eric and me, so I had basically gone to school my whole life one year behind Eric. I really didn't want to go to

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[2]The Jekel property was purchased by Brown-Forman at the beginning of 1992.

Stanford for that reason, and I also don't think I had the grades to get into Stanford, so I didn't even bother to apply there. However, I did apply to a variety of other schools and was really unsure where I wanted to go. I was accepted to USC, Oregon State, Davis, and a couple of other ones that have slipped my mind right now. I had a great love of snow skiing and probably decided to go to Davis for snow skiing as much as I did for the agricultural or viticultural and enology programs there.

My father didn't necessarily encourage that getting a degree in viticulture and enology was that necessary to continue on in the wine business. He always believed that with a good biological science background you could either go back to Davis, as Eric did to get his master's after he graduated from Stanford with a bachelor's in chemistry, or that you could have a substantial enough understanding of the basics that you could learn the rest on the job, so to speak. He was happy to have us go wherever we wanted. He would have been just as happy to have me go to USC as he was to have me go to Davis.

Teiser: When was a decision made--or was it ever really made--that you were going to be the agriculturalist and Eric was going to be the production person?

P. Wente: I don't know that there was any decision that was ever really made in that direction. I think we just kind of drifted into where our interests really were. When Eric first got out of college, he spent quite a bit of time in the office putting together a new accounting system for the company and learning the business management side of it, before he actually went out into the winery and became the winemaker. I will say this: after having graduated with a degree in agricultural science and management-- [tape off; telephone interruption]

Teiser: You and Eric settled into your separate interests?

P. Wente: We did. As I was saying, by the time I got my bachelor of science degree in agricultural science and management, which is pretty much a biological science major, I had umpteen hundred hours of lab work and other things, and it was very obvious to me that I really didn't care to be a technician in a laboratory. It wasn't my personality makeup to be very careful and delicate and technical in nature. I much preferred outside farming type of activities and the more physical labor of the vineyard area.

Teiser: Whom did you work with at Davis?

P. Wente: I was one of the last classes of students to have all the original [Repeal period] professors of the department there--Dr. [Maynard A.] Amerine, Dr. [Harold P.] Olmo, Dr. [Curtis J.] Alley, Professor [Cornelius] Ough. I took Dr. [Ralph E.] Kunkee's class on microbiology.

Teiser: Did you work at all with [Albert J.] Winkler?

P. Wente: No, Winkler was retired by that time. I met him several times and talked to him, but did not take any classes from him.

Teiser: You really did have a stellar array of professors.

P. Wente: They had been there for a number of years and put the department together. Let's see, Dinny [A. Dinsmoor] Webb was still there, and [Vernon L.] Singleton, and I took some classes from them. [Klayton E.] Nelson taught a class on ampelography, and it was difficult. I really enjoyed working with all of them.

Teiser: Did you work especially closely with any of them?

P. Wente: I probably worked more with Curt Alley in the vineyard than almost anybody else, although I worked quite a bit with Harold Olmo. He was my advisor, always giving me a bad time. I always wanted to try to get out of some class or another, and he'd look quite stern and say, "No, you can't."

I forgot to mention that another professor was Jim [James A.] Cook, whom I actually took my very first viticulture from. I always remember that he read down the roster and came to my name and said, "Oh, are you Karl's son?" I said, "Yes," and he said, "I want you to know something. No son of a winemaker has ever gotten an A in my class except Marko Zaninovich." [laughter] And he gave me a B+.

Teiser: How did Olmo steer you?

P. Wente: Oh, he didn't really steer me all that much. The way the system worked was that I pretty much set up my own major based on the various titles that they gave these things and how you could flex the classes that would meet the requirements of the major. Once you had all those picked out, Dr. Olmo would generally just go down the list and make sure I was on track for filling my course requirements. I remember trying to get out of Botany 2 or something like that. By the time I was a senior, I said, "Gee, I've already completed all the upper division classes. I don't know why I should have to go back and take this basic class." He said, "Because [bangs on the table] it's listed right here as one of the requirements." I was really rather

upset with him at the time, but I thought, "Okay, if that's the way I have to do it, I have to do it."

Teiser: Did you then go on to Berkeley?

P. Wente: No, I graduated and came to work.

Teiser: You didn't take any further courses?

P. Wente: I didn't take any further. I took just one graduate course there at Davis, I think, from Ralph Kunkee. Other than that I didn't take any other graduate work.

Teiser: There was no question of straying into another field?

P. Wente: No, none at all. Just like any other college kid, when I graduated I took a couple of the summer months off to have some fun, and then I came to work and have been here ever since.

Teiser: Did you travel before you came into the winery?

P. Wente: During the summer of '75 I went to Europe. I came to work for nine months first, and then I took eight weeks off and went to Europe with some friends. I didn't spend that much time particularly touring the wine business. We did go to visit a few people. I saw Louis Latour in Burgundy and several other growers there, but it was more just an enjoyment trip.

WENTE BROS. SINCE 1974

Construction, Equipment, and Systems

Teiser: What did you do first when you came into the winery in '74?

P. Wente: When I first started I did basically odd jobs, construction-oriented work that I filled in. I did a lot of electrical work, a lot of plumbing, and a lot of concrete work. I spent quite a bit of time in the farm shop welding farm equipment and a little bit of tractor driving and equipment operation. I think that first harvest I ran the mechanical harvesting crew, which consisted of one harvester at that time. [laughs] I had the night shift, and the machine harvested during the night.

It went from there into other types of jobs. We always have believed in doing as much of our own construction as we possibly could, and I think I spent probably the majority of my time over the next few years mostly construction-oriented, always improving the winery and building. It was heavily concrete work, a lot of tank foundations and slabs, production facilities. I used to spend quite a bit of time replanting vineyards and laying out irrigation systems and that type of thing.

Teiser: Were you contributing ideas, too?

P. Wente: In terms of the big picture and the direction of wine styles or the direction of the winery, no, I was not. In fact, there wasn't really all that much communication in those areas. It was more just status quo. Maybe in 1976 or so my father made arrangements for me to go out with some of the Parrott & Co. representatives. Parrott & Co. was our national distributor at that time and was owned by the Menzies family. He set up a series of week-long visits with some of our representatives, and

it was really my first experience in marketing. I really hadn't spent any time in seeing where the wine went after we made it. I spent more time on just day-to-day operations, and primarily operations in the vineyard and construction work that had to be done.

One of my first big projects that I was in charge of was enlarging our frost reservoir system to handle an additional several hundred acres of frost protection, and that sort of thing.

Teiser: Were you contributing ideas on how better to do construction and mechanization and that sort of thing?

P. Wente: Again, not all that much. We had Robert Detjens, our winery engineer, whom I mentioned earlier, who was really a very bright, outstanding individual in that field. He was so far ahead of the project that there was very little left to be thought out. In a lot of sense I was just one of the construction workers. A lot of the guys had a nickname for Robert; they called him "Mr. 64," meaning sixty-fourth of an inch--everything had to be so detailed, down to the finest, minutest decision. We all had a lot of fun with that. He was really an expert.

Teiser: Did you learn a lot from him?

P. Wente: I learned quite a bit from him. I really did. He taught me over and over again that if you do it right the first time, you never have to do it again.

Teiser: In recent years you've been in charge of some mechanization and equipment development?

P. Wente: We always keep searching for what we believe are the newest innovations going on in the industry and what are the latest quality trends. I won't say that I have been that much involved in terms of design of equipment. We used to be heavily oriented towards design and construction of our own equipment that was unique to the industry; nobody else in the industry offered a system anything like Wente Bros.

A lot of that had to do with my father and Robert Detjens, both who were quite inventive and outstanding visionaries in equipment design, the wine business, and what they wanted to accomplish. Since both of their passings, we have probably over the last four or five years really gone back to a little bit more what you might call standard equipment--what's available in the industry, and yet at the same time what is the leading edge

of the latest technology. We've been very careful to be sure that one of our number one priorities is to always continue designing so that we can keep the winery dynamic and modern and on the leading edge of current technology. I think we've been a leader in that field in terms of handling the grapes and juice and must. Nobody has a more gentle and rapid handling system than Wente Bros., and we still have some rather unique holdovers from my father and Robert Detjens' time in terms of how we harvest the grapes with our mechanical harvesters and how we deliver that grape to the winery.

Teiser: My impression was that in Monterey County you pioneered a system for harvesting and transporting the juice.

P. Wente: Yes, we've done a lot of things that you might call pioneering, and that's a good word for it. I won't necessarily say we originated the ideas or the systems, but we probably got the bugs out of them and put together one of the best systems in the business. In my and Eric's capacity since our father's passing, what probably caused the greatest revolution in the system of handling grapes was our sparkling wine production and the need to be able to mechanically harvest Pinot noir and handle it in such a manner that we came out with absolutely white juice for the production of *méthode champenoise* sparkling wine. It was from the problems posed by handling this Pinot noir that we developed our Arroyo Seco Monterey County pressing and grape-handling setup.

We decided that where we used to field crush in the old days and deliver liquid must to the winery, that system was no longer viable because there was too much extraction of tannins and other compounds from the skins that were causing a number of problems for us. What we did was move to a system where we could handle whole berries and whole clusters that were picked at night to keep them very cold--in the fifty to fifty-five degree range--and press them at night, so that we got the juice away from the skins as fast as possible. We were doing this in two- or three-ton lots, so the mechanical harvester was literally picking two to three tons in fifteen to twenty minutes. That two to three tons would only be at the most a mile or two radius from the press site and would be instantly delivered to the press site by our straddle truck system that we already had, where we could press it within an hour and therefore have almost no skin contact time and have a very white or light-colored juice, as in the case of Pinot noir.

One of our last special designs that we made was a bladder press with Valley Foundry that Bob Detjens did design in order to produce our sparkling wine cuvée. We believe that from that

we learned so much about the basic quality of really fresh juice, and we enjoyed that experience so much that we renovated our pressing facility here at the main winery to reflect that system that we built in Monterey.

Teiser: For grapes grown around here?

P. Wente: For grapes grown in Livermore and also grapes that we receive from the growers in this area.

Teiser: The transportation from Monterey to here--how long does it take?

P. Wente: It's about a three-hour truck trip. This system is basically for white wine or champagne cuvées. We transported it as refrigerated juice.

Teiser: Oh, you refrigerated it?

P. Wente: We had a refrigeration system down there for stainless steel tanks where we pressed and held the juice. Now, you have to remember that the juice was coming in at nighttime at about fifty to fifty-five degrees, so we didn't really need to refrigerate it all that much; it was at the right temperature, and we just needed to hold it at that temperature.

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Teiser: I remember one mid-day being down there and stopping for a sandwich at what they called the Slurp and Burp--

P. Wente: Oh, right there on the corner of Elm Avenue and First Street in Greenfield.

Teiser: --and seeing one of your trucks sitting there in the steaming heat for about an hour, I guess. I suppose that happened occasionally.

P. Wente: In those days we were probably shipping machine-harvested field crush grapes in four-ton closed tanks that sit on the back of a flatbed. It was our old system back then. We had applied SO_2 in the field. In those days we had about a six-hour schedule on it and were actually looking for skin contact time. A little bit different philosophy has developed since the late seventies and early eighties when we were using that system. Today we're looking for absolutely minimal skin contact time on most of our varietals because, again, it's white wine and not red wine.

Assuming Leadership, 1977

Teiser: What had you done by the time of your father's death, which I know was a turning point? I understand from your sister that you and Eric assumed responsibility quickly. Did you have fairly well-rounded experience by then?

P. Wente: Again, I would say, as I was pointing out in a roundabout way earlier, I think we had a fairly well-rounded experience in day-to-day operations here at the winery, but I think we were really quite lacking in understanding the wine business in terms of the big picture. The international wine business was not even a concept in our minds back then. Being rather isolated here in the Livermore Valley, we didn't have a lot of day-to-day contact with other vintners. We were very young; I was twenty-four, Eric was twenty-five, and Carolyn was twenty-one and still in college. So we really didn't see the sales side of the business, we didn't see the long-range planning side of the business. We hadn't really had that much of an opportunity to talk to our father about what his vision for the company was, where he intended to take the company.

We certainly could see from the wines that he had produced what he had desired to accomplish, and I think he had a very balanced program at that time. He had a couple of very popular-priced, well-known wines but also a very balanced distribution on some very premium wines such as Chardonnay, Sémillon, Sauvignon Blanc, and late-harvest Rieslings. We probably didn't have as good a grasp of that particular aspect of the business as we should have. Now, Ernest was still alive during this time and provided a lot of critical guidance for us, but Ernest himself was not as interested in the wine business and the romance and the marketing of wine as he was in the growing and the production of wine. This is where Herman had a great strength, and I believe that my father also took over that aspect from Herman, and that's what made him such an excellent partner for his father and what made Herman an excellent partner for Ernest.

Neither Eric nor I, unfortunately, had the time to spend with my father in terms of the marketing and the business vision side of the business. In terms of what my father thought our immediate education should be, it was always much more direct, hands-on operations. That's probably the one thing that I miss the most--not being able to learn from my father or ever being able to have any such discussion with him. It would be marvelous to have that discussion with him today.

Teiser: Your mother knew something of that, I suppose.

P. Wente: Hindsight is always real clear. My mother did have a good vision of those things, but I think she felt that probably it was best to let Eric and me go ahead and learn from our mistakes rather than coming in with any particular set of rigid ideas or directions. I think my grandfather felt very much the same way. Maybe the two of them stood back and had a conversation about letting us go ahead and make it or break it on our own.

Teiser: Well, it worked, didn't it?

P. Wente: It worked. We undoubtedly made some mistakes and went in some directions that probably were better not to have done, but I think that's true of most companies. We did some things right, and we did some things wrong. That's not to say that I won't go ahead and do some wrong things in the rest of my life, but I hope I do more right ones than wrong ones.

Teiser: I wish I'd been able to interview your father. The two people I most regret not having interviewed are your father and John Daniel, Jr.

P. Wente: I wish you had been able to do that, too, because it certainly would have given me a lot better vision of what he was thinking. It's too bad you didn't have an opportunity to interview Herman as well.

Marketing and Distribution

P. Wente: One of the other fairly strong influences in our lives at that time was John Gallagher, who was the president of Parrott & Co. Right at my father's death, my father and Louis Martini were negotiating with the Menzies family to buy Parrott & Co., along with John Gallagher. John Gallagher became a one-third partner in Parrott & Co. with the Louis Martini family and the Wente family. So he had a very influential position in the marketing and direction of our wines. He was really a hard-driving salesman with a great knowledge of the business, but not a particular wine enthusiast as much as he was a hard-nosed businessman.

I'd say that the hard-nosed business aspect of his view of things probably had a fairly strong influence on how Wente Bros. grew for a number of years. We grew very rapidly with wines such as Le Blanc de Blancs, Grey Riesling, and chablis, and

probably not as balanced as we should have with wines like Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon, Pinot Noir, and some of the other premium varietals that we were making. They took a little bit of a back seat to the wines that could really sell a lot of cases.

Over the last six or seven years we've really reversed that direction and focused more on the historical varieties that Ernest and Herman and my father had really built their reputations on, which were Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon, and Johannisberg Riesling in my father's case, particularly from Monterey County. I think Karl certainly won a lot of fame and prestige for a series of late-harvest Rieslings that he was able to introduce from that Arroyo Seco vineyard.

Teiser: I wonder what was the effect of marketing with a red wine company?

P. Wente: I'm not exactly familiar with the dates of Wente Bros. association with Parrott & Co. However, I believe it to be sometime in the late thirties or early forties, where they represented us in the Western United States. They took over from Frank Schoonmaker as one of our agents, and Twenty-One Brands took over as the other. At that time, it's my recollection from stories that have been told that Louis Martini, Korbel, and Louis Benoist at Almaden joined with Parrott & Co. at the same time, so we've been marketing with Louis Martini for a number of years. When the Martini family and the Wente family, along with John Gallagher, purchased Parrott & Co., it was a very amiable relationship. Certainly in my view Louis Martini is one of the most wonderful individuals in the industry. He was almost like a second father to us in a lot of ways. He was a very calm and stable influence, along with my grandfather, Ernest, who got along extremely well with Louis. The two of them would always keep things--

Teiser: Louis, Sr.?

P. Wente: No, Louis, Jr. I guess I should say Louis P. Martini. Louis P. was certainly very stable and down to earth. He probably had a lot more vision of marketing along the lines of my grandfather, which in the end may have been somewhat unfortunate for us, in that during the time when the wine business became so highly competitive, their philosophy was a little bit more along the lines that if you made a great bottle of wine for an outstanding value, it will sell itself. They weren't prone to the idea of wanting to market themselves or to place themselves on any type of pedestal as superstars along with Robert Mondavi's angle of marketing, where it really is quite important to market your

brand name, your family, your winemaker, as much as it is just to sell wine--that image is everything. This is a lesson that the Wente family and the Martini family probably learned a little late in life. It's a lesson that we both learned, but at the same time it's very hard to struggle back up the ladder, considering that we were probably both on top of the ladder in the late seventies. We did go down a few rungs in people's view of us, but I believe that on an over-all quality basis both wineries continued to produce outstanding, award-winning wines, whatever subjective criteria you want to use for quality. Across the board, our wines were really second to none, but the image and the marketing of our wineries was such that in the connoisseur's view they were not as exclusive or elite as they should have been because Grey Riesling and Le Blanc de Blancs were mass marketed.

Teiser: Do you think it had anything to do with your pricing?

P. Wente: I think it did have something to do with our pricing. We don't think we kept our pricing on our premium wines, such as Chardonnay, Pinot Noir, Sémillon, and late-harvest Rieslings up in the areas that we should have. Also I think it had to do with our control of our distribution networks, both at Parrott & Co. and our local distributors in major cities. We did not have marketing programs that focused or targeted our premium wines to be in the right restaurant accounts and didn't put enough pressure on the distribution system to make sure that we got our fair share of wine lists, placements in premium package stores, and other things. We probably let the distribution system drift with the sales of our wines, and I think it's an obvious conclusion that most people have always come to, that if you let marketing and distribution drift, it will always tend to drift downward and sell what is easiest to sell, which is the lowest-priced wines. That's just the natural tendency.

That is certainly nobody's fault but our own for not controlling our own destiny. Those, again, are hard lessons that we learned, where we probably could have used a little bit more of our father's vision or knowledge in guidance during those years. I think we have a pretty firm grip of that reality today, and we have a pretty firm grip of the worldwide wine market.

One of the things that is still pretty difficult in this vision is that you can certainly see what you would like to do and where you would like to be, but it's a business that is sometimes rather slow to be able to achieve those goals. It's not a business where you can change your product overnight; it

often takes five to ten years to accomplish even the smallest of tasks.

Teiser: To go back to the point about marketing with Louis Martini--did it delay your interest in red wine that appears to have grown recently?

P. Wente: I think it did have some effect on us, although that was a conscious decision. I think it was a very good partnership for a number of years for that very reason. Certainly in the thirties and forties, to my biased recollection of what I've read about the wine industry and been told, Napa Valley was known rather as the red wine district of California, and Livermore Valley was known as the premium white wine district or Sauternes district of California. Having the Napa Valley producer producing red wines and Livermore Valley producer producing white wines was the natural fit. At the same time, that's where our focus was, that's where our anchorage was, but we always did produce some red wines--some Pinot Noirs; some burgundies, which were primarily produced out of Petite Sirah, which later became a Petite Sirah varietal; and we produced Cabernet off and on, depending, a few years here and there, as well as some Zinfandel. We always made those wines, but they never got the focus from Parrott & Co. because Louis Martini was making all of those wines, and that was fine with us. We made Chardonnays, Sauvignon Blancs, Sémillons, Pinot Blancs, and Rieslings; and he produced Chardonnay, Gewürztraminer, and some other white wines, and he never got the focus vice versa from Parrott, and generally that was fine with him. They weren't their priorities, that wasn't where their production orientation was slanted.

Since we stopped marketing together, our Cabernet has been one of our fastest-growing items percentagewise, and we've also refocused a lot of our production facilities to be able to increase our production of Cabernet and Merlot as well as Zinfandel and Pinot Noir. We look forward to being a little more balanced winery in that sense, but I still don't think it will represent any part of the main part of the Wente Bros. business in the future; I still think we'll always be known as a white wine winery, and that's where our focus will be. Probably upwards of 80 percent of our sales will always remain white wines.

Teiser: I like your Zinfandel.

P. Wente: I do, too. It's from that marvelous old Raboli vineyard, right behind the winery here, that's some seventy-five years old, and

maybe only ten years younger than Lionel Raboli himself. [laughs]

Expanding Wente Properties Since 1977

Teiser: You've been making new plantings in the Livermore Valley since '77, I believe.

P. Wente: Yes. I think one of the unfortunate things that has happened to the Livermore Valley that we're able to sit here and look backwards at with the clarity of hindsight is that the whole political process was going through a dynamic change during the sixties. The state mandate for all jurisdictions to have general plans, planning units, and these types of things wasn't in place in the early sixties, and growth was rather rampant and helter-skelter. The tax assessor was having a marvelous time running around assessing things at various whims and notions. My father really believed that there might come a time, given the way things were going at that date, that the Livermore Valley would no longer be viable for winegrowing, much as the northern Santa Clara Valley, unfortunately, has seen a demise. So he headed out for Monterey County.

But then, as in most cases whenever there are excesses, which there seemed to be in the planning and development area of the valley at that time, cooler heads prevailed and the state mandated its general plan laws and regulations. The cities and the counties got things under control, and by the mid-seventies growth had slowed substantially and it didn't appear that we were going to be in a valley with a million people and all these other horrible forecasts.

There was a substantial amount of land left in the prime winegrowing area of Livermore Valley that had a historic winegrowing background. The real estate market slowed to the point where the speculators were mostly gone, and prices were returning to agricultural values, and we were able to acquire the 640-acre Beyer Ranch, which is just east of the winery here, and we were able to acquire the old Schenley-Cresta Blanca property, which is west of the winery here, about midway between the winery and the city of Pleasanton on the farthest south side of the city of Livermore and the winegrowing area. That consisted of a 315-acre purchase. To back up one further, I believe our first purchase, in 1977, shortly after my father's death, was the 100-acre Migilore Ranch, which is directly adjacent to the original winery parcel here.

Between all those acquisitions it amounts to almost a thousand acres of new vineyard land here in the Livermore Valley, and that's a significant and substantial investment that we made. We originally purchased the old Schenley property--the Wetmore Ranch, where the old Cresta Blanca establishment was, as it's known in its various names--for the land. We had very little interest in the winery buildings themselves. It was our belief at the time that the cooperage was all ruined, and on many of the buildings the roofs of the buildings had fallen in to the floor and were in great disrepair.

Teiser: Schenley had thought to develop it, didn't it?

P. Wente: Schenley had another forty or sixty acres right on the edge of the City of Livermore, and that seemed very viable to development, where they thought eventually, I believe, that they were going to develop the home ranch, or the Cresta Blanca ranch itself. I think they also thought in the back of their mind--again, these are just rumors or conversations I have heard second- or third-hand--that they might want to get back in the wine business some day, so they held it in terms of speculation. They did lease out the winery cooperage; I think they closed [their Livermore Valley operations] in '65, and they actively leased the winery cooperage out until about '77 or '78. Then at that point they just basically shut everything down, and they really let things go to pot.

So we bought it in '81.

Teiser: Myron Nightingale's stories of Schenley are rather shocking.

P. Wente: Yes, it's really unfortunate, because it's such a beautiful winery. They had quite a name; Cresta Blanca had one of the finest names in the business at one time.

Teiser: You've certainly brought it up--

P. Wente: Well, we've spent a lot of time. After we had some engineers review the buildings, we realized that actually the structural parts of the buildings were still fairly sound. Then it became an issue of what we were going to do with the buildings, because, as I say, we had originally considered taking a wrecking ball to the whole place and just growing vineyard there, which is what our primary interest was, not to acquire a second winery. We were right in our estimation of the cooperage; it was all pretty well shot, but we were able to salvage some of it.

We kicked around several different alternatives. At that time we had already started our sparkling wine venture. We laid down our first cuveé in 1980 and were planning to build a sparkling wine facility down at the Arroyo Seco Ranch in Greenfield. When this opportunity came along to have these buildings already in existence, we reconsidered our venture. Why build a whole new set of buildings down there when we could have these in more of a ready-to-go state with a less substantial investment? Although I'm not sure it turned out to be less.

I think it was always the romance of the whole situation, Eric, Carolyn, and I having grown up and knowing the old Cresta Blanca facility, and what a beautiful old winery it had been. Wanting to preserve it was sentimental, and it probably colored some of our business decisions at the same time. But I think that's the difference between being an old family in the business and being a hard-nosed investor in this business.

Teiser: Did you rework the caves?

P. Wente: We expanded them and reworked them to bring them up to modern code. We reworked all the buildings. Actually, we tore several of the buildings down that were just beyond repair. We reworked the buildings that were still in a reasonable enough structural situation to salvage, and we built one new building there, which is the restaurant, although it does sit on part of the foundation and basement of the old tasting room or hospitality house, as they called it, that Cresta Blanca had there.

Teiser: The caves--I should think it would be a real advantage to have that much storage space, whether or not you'd reconstructed the buildings.

P. Wente: We were able to remodel the caves for a relatively low square-foot construction price, so yes, there was an advantage there just in terms of creating storage space. It was about on the same order as a tilt-up concrete warehouse type of building. And obviously these caves have a lot of romance and attractiveness about them. However, we weren't necessarily looking for more winery storage there in particular, just due to the fact that hauling barrels back and forth over there didn't present a very efficient type of winemaking operation. When we had the idea of creating a completely separate type of production facility for méthode champenoise sparkling wine, it really made a lot more sense to go ahead and renovate the entire set of buildings.

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Teiser: It has turned into a practical facility?

P. Wente: It has. [tape off. Phone interruption]

The Sparkling Wine Business

Teiser: I take it from your tone of voice that it has turned into a practical facility with qualifications?

P. Wente: We started planning to get into the *méthode champenoise* sparkling wine business in about 1978. It was something that we felt our father wanted to see done with the Chardonnay and Pinot noir grapes at Arroyo Seco. He always believed that it was the perfect cool climate to be able to produce classic *méthode champenoise* sparkling wine there, and we thought we would try to carry that out. You have to realize that in 1978, when we were looking at the sparkling wine business in California, there were only a few producers--Korbel, Hanns Kornell, Schramsberg; Domaine Chandon was just really getting started, and Piper Sonoma, I believe, was under construction. That was about the extent of it, so it looked like a rather wide-open field to be getting into.

Little did we know that literally at the same time we were planning on that, there were ten or fifteen other companies going through the same gyrations themselves. Since then the sparkling wine business has become a very competitive business in California, with a lot of new and different producers entering the marketplace, most of them at this point having some type of very formidable French connection or Spanish connection with substantial funding and financing behind their brands. So for a small family winery like ours, it presents a very difficult proposition to market sparkling wine as a line extension. At this point it doesn't seem to be that widely accepted by the consumer as a line extension for wineries. Neither Chateau St. Jean nor Sebastiani nor Mirassou, and I could name a few others off the top of my head--Beaulieu--have been successful at creating a strong demand for a sparkling wine from a noted table wine house. The more successful people have been the ones who have come in with a lot of funding, have created a beautiful facility--which I think we did, so we at least covered that part of it--and have had some type of European connection. Schramsberg is really one of the only major independents that's been able to make a real go of it in

terms of economic sense, but still with only the sparkling wine focus.

One of the things that we have done that has made the facility very worthwhile, though, is adding the restaurant to it and the small conference room that we operate at it--diversifying the uses. We have our summer concert series there, and we do a lot of our public relations and other types of benefits there. But we're spreading the base of the overhead there substantially, including the sparkling wine business itself, and therefore the facility has become a very positive business aspect to our overall portfolio. At the same time I think we continue to evaluate how we're going to approach the sparkling wine business. There needs to be some dynamic vision and change given to the whole situation.

Focusing on the Classical Varieties

Teiser: As you acquired property, you did plant more vineyards. Did you have an overall plan?

P. Wente: Since Eric and I and Carolyn have been looking at those decisions, I think we have probably been greatly influenced by the sales trend of our own wines, by what appeared to be selling in the marketplace, and by the tradition or direction that the family had always focused on. During the late seventies and early eighties we continued to expand our plantings of Grey Riesling and Chenin blanc to produce Grey Riesling and Le Blanc de Blancs. At the same time we greatly expanded our plantings of Chardonnay because we really believe that Wente Bros. had always been one that had a leading role in the production of Chardonnay and that it was one of the varieties that we felt did exceptionally well in both Livermore and Arroyo Seco.

And we modestly increased our plantings of Sauvignon blanc and Sémillon, more from a traditional aspect; I think we always believed that Sauvignon Blanc would maintain a slow, steady growth rate, which it seems to have, but Sémillon has always been a little bit more of a difficult sell. It probably reached its peak in terms of our sales percentage back in the mid-fifties. But it is, again, a variety that we dearly love in terms of tradition and taste, and we continue to produce it.

Teiser: Do you add Sémillon to your Sauvignon Blanc?

P. Wente: We do on occasion, and vice versa; sometimes we add Sauvignon Blanc to our Sémillon. And sometimes we add Sémillon to our Chardonnay, so it's a rather versatile variety, and it seems to be enjoying a little bit of resurgence in interest right now. We have a number of wineries contacting us about the purchase of Sémillon grapes that they're using in some of their programs. I think Sémillon has a very bright future. I think it's one of the classic varieties, as I do Sauvignon blanc, of the Bordeaux area, and will retain recognition among wine drinkers around the world. Certainly the same thing can be said of Chardonnay, so if anything, over the last four or five years, when we have concentrated our plantings and our visions, they are probably on the top four or five Classic French varietals of the Burgundy and Bordeaux regions.

We've shied away from Rhone Valley varietals or Loire Valley varietals. There have been other people who have recently been quite successful with Rhone varietals, and they may warrant some consideration. We were producing Petite Sirah for a number of years, and it was quite popular, but Petite Sirah got substantially undermined in a rather controversial move, that I always thought was rather unfair, by the University of California and the California Department of Food and Agriculture [CDFA] in a not very scientific background study of the origin of the variety, claiming that it was Durif. We have a complete set of very extensive ampelographies that were printed around the turn of the century that made Petite Sirah a synonym for Sirah rather than Durif. It says that Durif and Petite Sirah have absolutely nothing in common.

The same was true of Pinot blanc. It was undermined, again, by the CDFA, and the Foundation for Plant Materials at UC Davis coined it a Melon de Bourgogne rather than Pinot blanc. I question the veracity of the genetic research done on that in terms of how long that particular strain of Pinot blanc has been in California; it's been here for well over a hundred years, and things change naturally through generations of repetition, replanting, and that type of thing.

Anyway, we basically thought we had to walk away at that point from Pinot blanc and Petite Sirah, because they had been undermined in reputation by the University and the CDFA. Therefore there was no point in putting a lot of time and energy behind them, because the connoisseurs and the "wine experts" would not accept them as premier premium varietals. We felt we were much better off to focus on truly what we believed was known to be the classic varietals. We think there will be fads and trends to things like White Zinfandel or sweet Rieslings or dry Rieslings or a variety of other wine concoctions that you

can come up with, but classically produced Chardonnay and Pinot Noir and classically produced Cabernet and Sauvignon Blanc are always going to maintain a marketplace niche as well, and we would prefer to stay in those classic areas.

Teiser: Do you have Sauvignon blanc in Monterey County?

P. Wente: We do not. We have nursery blocks in small amounts. We have certified increase nursery blocks there where we can grow the vines to produce cuttings for sale but not for production purposes.

Changes in Vineyard Practices

Teiser: As you have replanted, have you made any changes in culture and spacing?

P. Wente: We have continued to do a variety of experiments on spacing, and it almost is amusing sometimes, in that we would do what my grandfather called "going back to the way we used to do it." We've done experiments with spacing as close as four by eight, some eight by eight; we've done some spacings where we planted ten-foot rows and then two vine rows one foot apart and then a ten-foot row. We continue to experiment and to do a variety of things. We think we're going to be much more flexible in the future in terms of spacing per soil type more than anything else. We don't think there's a uniform type of trellis system or vine spacing that can be applied to California, like the old eight by twelve system that Winkler recommended that was so widely used. You've got to be a little bit more intelligent about the vigor of the soil, the potential of the vines used, the amount of space that you're giving it. In very poor soils, you obviously need to have much closer spacing.

Teiser: What about mechanical harvesting?

P. Wente: We believe that mechanical harvesting is a very substantial quality tool, and we would like to continue to be able to develop trellising and spacing that would be able to adapt to a mechanical harvest system. This is primarily because the technology of it has developed to the point where it harvests the same percentage as hand harvest, is much more expedient, and can be done very effectively at nighttime, and we believe that temperature is everything in harvest. And light exposure also has a significant catalytic effect as well. So for those reasons mechanical harvesting, we believe, has some very strong

advantages over hand harvesting. We still have probably 30 to 40 percent of our vineyards hand harvested due to the trellis types, the hillsides, younger vines, and those types of things that don't adapt well to mechanical harvesting.

Teiser: You've done some mechanical preliminary pruning, is that right?

P. Wente: There was a real trend towards a potential for 100 percent mechanical pruning in the early eighties. We don't see that here as being a very viable vehicle for super and ultra premium vineyards or vineyards that are targeted at super to ultra premium wines. However, pre-pruning with some kind of mechanical trimming equipment has been around for decades, and it is no miracle invention by anybody, and I won't claim to be the inventor of it, either. It simply amounts to getting maybe two-thirds to three-quarters of the brush out of the way before your hand crew comes along to select the remaining spurs for the next year's harvest. In a case where you might want to do cane pruning, I think then you cannot use a pre-prune system, because you need to leave the brush there in order to select the full-length canes.

Phylloxera and Other Vineyard Problems

Teiser: May I bring up phylloxera at this point? I remember that your grandfather insisted upon planting on resistant rootstock in Monterey County.

P. Wente: Yes, he did. All the original plantings down there are on A x R #1. Herman and Karl did some experimenting in the past with St. George and a few of the other rootstock varietals that were available in the fifties and sixties. We're like most other people in the state, in that most all the studies showed that in a variety of soil types A x R #1 was not only giving the best production but also the best wine quality. I just went to a rootstock seminar up in Napa a couple of weeks ago, and even today A x R #1, where it can survive phylloxera, still looks, from a production [point of view]--and I'm not talking tonnage production but the leaf surface area compared to crop ripened--like one of the nicest balanced rootstocks available today. There are still more A x R being planted today than any other rootstock in the business, so the phylloxera biotype B scare has not driven everybody out of the A x R market at this point. We do have about three-quarters of our vineyard acreage in Monterey County planted on A x R #1.

Teiser: Have you had phylloxera there?

P. Wente: There is phylloxera present in Monterey County. At this point we have found no presence on our ranch. That was always one of my great worries in traveling from Livermore to Monterey, with the amount of equipment that we shipped back and forth. We were always very careful to wash and sterilize all our equipment. One of my biggest nightmares would be that I was the one who contaminated Monterey County. Fortunately, I'm glad to say that at this point it appears that we were not the ones. [laughs] Unfortunately, Monterey County has been contaminated with phylloxera, but at this point it looks like it's all biotype A, and the A x R is still resistent to it.

Teiser: Have you used A x R #1 here in Livermore, too?

P. Wente: Yes. The majority of our plantings here are on A x R #1. We do have some St. George. We are looking at a variety of things that we're going to do. Right now our new plantings have been on both 5BB and Freedom. We're also looking at the possibility of going with some Teleki 5C, some new SO4--the proper form of SO4 that UC Davis has got in stock now. Again, we're looking for rootstocks that are a little bit more on the vigorous side, such as Freedom, because in the Livermore Valley typically most of the soils are in the very poor strain--either very heavily gravelly or rocky, or very dense red clay. There is very little sandy loam or river bottom type soils like you see in the Napa Valley, which are deep and rich.[1] Our historic tonnages here have never gotten above three to three and a half tons to the acre on average, and we just don't possess soil types that are going to produce seven, eight, or nine tons to the acre Cabernet or Chardonnay as they do in the Napa Valley floor.

Teiser: You have other problems in your vineyards here in the Livermore Valley, as I remember.

P. Wente: Our single biggest problem, which is a problem that is not unique to the Livermore Valley, certainly, but seems to have taken a particular domination, is xiphinema index, the nematode that is the virus vector. We have both xiphinema index and xiphinema americanum as well as several of the root knot lesion nematode varieties. However, both of those varieties, the root knot and lesion varieties, don't seem to adapt as well to Livermore soils and don't move as freely, so they're much less of a problem.

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[1]See also p. 106.

Our primary problem is the xiphanema species and the fan-leaf, yellow mosaic, leaf roll, and other viruses that they transmit to the vines. On top of that probably our next biggest pest in terms of vine damage is Eutypa, which is the more commonly known apricot dieback. Both of those problems would probably exceed phylloxera in terms of pests. In fact, several years ago we viewed our phylloxera problem so low that we planted almost four hundred acres on their own roots here. In hindsight it was probably not that wise a decision, knowing what we know now about the potential for B Type. Everywhere is a lot like what Monterey County used to be. A lot of people felt that phylloxera and virus would never be transmitted to Monterey County, but it's bound to happen, I guess, and B Type is bound to reach Livermore Valley at some time. At this point we're now taking steps, as I mentioned, to continue to plant on what is thought to be biotype B resistant rootstocks for phylloxera, also with a heavy emphasis on nematode-resistant stocks.

There appears to be a new patented stock out of Davis called 39-16 that shows both some reasonable vigor and a substantial resistance to dagger nematodes, although not that much of a resistance to root knot and lesian, and also some resistance to or a masking of the effects of the viruses--not a complete resistance, but some resistance anyway. It really looks like a potential rootstock that might be excellent for us. However, it does bring along several problems with it. It's very difficult to get it to root, and it's a little bit more difficult to accept a union or a graft or a field bud than the A x R. Let's say the A x R is the comparative scale.

Teiser: Do you have any plans that might hinge on genetic engineering?

P. Wente: At one time I was very excited about genetic engineering. The University hired a young professor named Robert Logan who was going to be their genetic engineering hero. He came around to a lot of the wineries and promised great things out of genetic engineering: we were going to get rootstocks that were going to be resistant to fan-leaf and nematodes and phylloxera and all these other things, and it could be done in five years. He made presentations to the Wine Institute for this type of funding and other things. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons the system caught up with him, and he was offered a substantial amount more money in private industry and left the University. None of the things that were originally promised out of the great days of genetic engineering breakthroughs have really come around in my vision. I still believe that the potential for genetic engineering is there, but most of the people you'll talk to, at least today in 1991, won't put quite as much miracle stock in genetic engineering as they once did.

Teiser: Back to cross-pollinization?

P. Wente: Not back to cross pollinization so much as it is back to studying what is available in your own vineyards. What natural resistance has developed? Rely more on what you can see with your own two eyes and don't count on so many miracles.

Teiser: How about natural predators?

P. Wente: There is a lot of talk, and there has been for a number of years, about natural predators for insects, particularly [grape] leafhopper and even some of the others, like skeletonizer, tortrix, and other things. Primarily, here in Livermore Valley our only insect predator is leaf hopper. We don't have any orange tortrixes, grape leaf skeletonizers, or other things, so we're fortunate in that--knock on wood! Livermore Valley has always been a relatively isolated winegrowing region and has been somewhat saved from the ravages of the movement of some of these pests.

In Monterey County we do see some tortrix and several of the other things. We were leaf hopper-free down there for a number of years. It's only been in the last, oh, three to five years that we've seen a substantial infestation of the grape leaf hopper, which is too bad. We're also primarily free in both areas of Pierce's Disease; I haven't seen Pierce's Disease in Livermore, and I don't believe it's been introduced into Monterey County at this time, although you never know. Again, knock on wood. That is a substantial advantage for us over the Napa-Sonoma areas.

Monterey County Varieties

Teiser: Have you changed varieties in Monterey County?

P. Wente: We've done some T-budding down there, primarily Grey Riesling to Chardonnay, but we have just basically seen the phasing out of Grey Riesling from where it was once a very popular varietal. Primarily through the late sixties and seventies Grey Riesling was popular. I'm not that familiar with the history of it before then. From what I read and see, and from a lot of our notes, it was a variety that Wente had made for a number of years but wasn't necessarily any more popular than Sauvignon Blanc or Pinot Blanc or Chardonnay or any of the other things we were making. It was just kind of unique to us, maybe in the

thirties, forties, and fifties. Amerine and Winkler were always harping about the fact that it was a lower-class variety, and they really didn't encourage very many people to plant it. There were only a few wineries that ever made it.

We have grafted all of our Grey Riesling in Monterey over to Chardonnay, but we continue mostly in that vineyard to focus on Chardonnay, Pinot noir, Riesling, Gewürztraminer. We have a very small amount of Chenin blanc down there. We're not really experimenting with any other varieties in that area. We still have a substantial amount of Pinot blanc, or what was called Pinot blanc; we're grandfathered in for the life of the vineyard to be able to call it Pinot blanc.

Teiser: You make a varietal Gewürztraminer?

P. Wente: We do, yes, in a limited quantity. If you're not selling it for $3.99 or $4.99 a bottle, it's very difficult to sell much of a volume of Gewürztraminer. I think Gallo and Fetzer have been relatively successful in selling huge quantities of Gewürztraminer, but it's at a very competitive price. We'd prefer to sell it in the $8.00 range. We sell a fermented dry style, and at that rate it's difficult to sell.

Cresta Blanca Vineyards

Teiser: Going back to Cresta Blanca, I read somewhere that when you bought the land you estimated that it would cost you $10,000 an acre to plant. Did it?

P. Wente: That's interesting. I hope I wasn't the one who estimated that. Ten thousand dollars an acre is kind of a common planting figure that's thrown out by any number of authorities or business people giving estimates on planting vineyards. One thing I would say about Cresta Blanca is that the vineyard itself had been abandoned for a long time.

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Teiser: You said Cresta Blanca's vineyards were abandoned.

P. Wente: Yes, they were abandoned since the early seventies, I guess. We bought the fruit over there up until maybe '72 or '73. We purchased the ranch, as I said, in '81, and the most difficult and probably one of the most expensive aspects was cleaning up the old vineyard. It was so overgrown, with a lot of oak trees

springing up, typical of anything that's been abandoned for that length of time. It was heavily overgrown, and it took a long time to build the land up.

I think our typical vineyard planting expense in the mid-eighties, with overhead sprinkler irrigation that was installed there--that particular vineyard is on its own roots--probably was in the four- to five-thousand-dollar-an-acre range to establish that vineyard. If you want to factor in the expense of the first three years of care before harvest, you may get it up to the eight- to ten-thousand-dollar range. There are a lot of figures about the economics of winegrowing that are thrown around, but you need to know how they're qualified. [laughs]

Teiser: I was over there the other day looking around, trying to find Carolyn's house. I was asking Carolyn if you had any plans to plant on the hillsides.

P. Wente: I have thought a lot about that. We have fifteen hundred acres of pasture land that lies between the old Cresta Blanca winery and this facility here, and a lot of it is a rather steep slope, and some slope types aren't particularly conducive to planting, but there a lot of it is moderate slopes that could be planted.

Land Use Planning

P. Wente: I think one of the things that we've been striving very hard to do here in the valley is to put together a comprehensive, long-range plan for what we call the Livermore Valley winegrowing district. We've worked closely with the county, the cities, and the like in putting together a couple of different very high-profile plans that we hope will significantly increase the awareness, the image, and the investment potential of this valley. If we can achieve these things, and the Livermore Valley name and appellation--or we've also applied for San Francisco Bay appellation--become significant and well known and command a premium for those grapes such that it would encourage additional planting, then I think it would make a lot of sense to start investigating planting on the hillsides.

In the meantime, I think it may do us well to select several hillsides and do some small experimental plots to see what types of grape varieties we can have there. It's been in the back of my mind for a couple of years now; however, we've

got so many irons in the fire right now with all these development projects and other things that our resources are fairly well used up in terms of that type of adventure. So it's an adventure that's going to have to remain on the back burner for the time being.

Teiser: You're in an agricultural preserve, aren't you?

P. Wente: Yes, part of our property is and part is not.

Teiser: How much of it is?

P. Wente: Probably three-quarters of it is.

Teiser: Is that good?

P. Wente: It depends on what day of the week it is. What we've actually done is file for non-renewal on about three hundred acres of our Williamson Act contracts, and I've done that primarily to keep the city and county in line. I think sometimes when people are used to seeing property in a certain state, they begin to take for granted that it just remains that way rather effortlessly, and that it's their own personal park rather than my private property. I think every now and then you have to rattle their cage a little bit to keep them honest and to make them realize that things just don't happen that way out of the goodness of everybody's heart. It's a lot of hard work, and this is a business. The economics of this business are driven by the economy and the community and all of the other factors and influences. They can't just zone us at their whim to be a permanent agricultural park just because they feel like it.

We're taking steps across the valley right now to make sure that we drive the direction of the future of this area rather than the planning commissions and the city councils and the county supervisors. We intend to do that out of an economic base by creating plans that are so strongly driven that they can't be refused.

Teiser: Do you have a general vision for the future of the valley?

P. Wente: We do as a company, or as a family, let's call it. About six years ago we hired the architectural firm that did the sparkling wine cellars, Robert Lamb Hart, and had them put together a map of the south Livermore valley, naming the property owners on each parcel and outlining what was on those parcels at that time--which ones were developed, which ones had five-acre homes on them, which ones were still generally open, and agriculture. We colored this map in in a variety of colors that would show a

whole variety of potential things happening, from recreation and parks to vineyard to subdivisions or suburban type development, and wine use potential.

We took this map on a road show, basically, to the various interest groups in this valley and in the county. The supervisors became quite interested in it and funded a $200,000 study to outline what might be done in what we call "this winegrowing district." Coming out of that they basically outlined a district that is roughly fifteen thousand acres in size that now houses approximately two thousand acres of vineyard in it and a definite potential for, let's say, six to eight thousand acres of additional vineyard. We don't believe that 100 percent of anything ever happens, but we do reasonably believe that maybe four to five thousand acres of that six to eight thousand acre potential might be put back into vineyards. So we could end up being somewhere between a five-and six-thousand-acre planted vineyard district.

At this point we have roughly eight wineries, two of which, Concannon and Wente, have sizeable national distribution facilities, and another six small, local, boutique wineries that are in operation. We felt that if we could attract one or two more nationally distributed, relatively large-sized--fifty to a hundred thousand cases--type operations, as well as maybe another ten local boutique-sized wineries, we would have a very significant winegrowing district that could take its place in the California scheme of things and be well noted and well known.

Primarily, this would be driven by the fact that we are in the Bay Area, and that we are within forty-five minutes of six million people. Therefore we have a profile that is undeniable; we have a high visibility that we can't get away from even if we wanted to. We think that we could take advantage of that high visibility by creating a very well-thought-out plan and mix of upscale development; beautiful recreational opportunities, from equestrian to golf to tennis to using the natural resources--such as Lake Del Valle, which is right behind the winegrowing district, for water sports, to the beautiful Sycamore Grove Park that runs right down through the middle of the winegrowing district. The gravel quarry area near Pleasanton, which is right on the northern boundary of the winegrowing district, has a potential chain of recreational lakes. Around the year 2000, most of those are supposed to be deeded over to the Zone 7 water district for both water storage and recreation. It all lines up along Arroyo Del Valle, from Sycamore Grove Park--actually, all the way from the Del Valle Regional State Park, down the Arroyo

del Valle, and all the way through the gravel pits will be one long park district with a variety of uses.

The potential there is absolutely outstanding in terms of what people look for when they want to associate their love, image, and romance of winegrowing. As we talked about earlier, no product in the world has the romance of wine. If you want people to have a high concept of your wine, you've got to create the image and romance so that when they come to see where the wine came from, they're literally swept off their feet by the beauty, the romance, and the activities of the area. I think Monterey County is a classic example of a region where just vineyards don't create success; you must create an environment that enhances the salability of the vineyards. Market-price grapes in California will never be an economic success; you must be able to be the winegrowing district that commands a 15 or 20 percent better-than-market-price range for your grapes--or whatever; maybe 100 percent better. But you must achieve a niche.

With all of these types of thoughts, we set out to put the first few pieces in place. The first piece of the puzzle that we thought we would achieve was our sparkling wine cellars--the renovation of the old Cresta Blanca winery; a beautiful, first-class restaurant to put our best face to the world; a conference center where we could attract executive-level corporations to hold business meetings and introduce them to Wente Bros. and the restaurant.

Secondly, we tried to work with Computerland, which purchased the old Ruby Hill winery and the Hagemann vineyard, which Almaden had leased since the early forties. They were two three-hundred-acre parcels that Computerland combined into a six-hundred-acre parcel and was planning to put a corporate center there that would be surrounded by vineyards. Well, Computerland ran into a variety of legal problems and financial problems and was forced to liquidate the property very rapidly in order to post a cash bond for some of their legal problems, so we stepped up to acquire that six hundred acres. Southern Pacific had owned half of it before that, along with the Hagemans, who had owned the other half, as I mentioned.

We didn't want to see it go through another scenario that would not lend itself to the environment that we are looking for for the wine business, so we went out on a limb, so to speak--it seemed to be a pretty big limb at the time, and it's turned out to be a huge limb--and acquired that. We did some plans, again with Robert Lamb Hart, put together some concepts for a golf resort-vineyard complex with a limited housing development.

After investigating that concept for a while, we were told it wasn't enough land--six hundred acres--to really be an attractive situation, so we set out to acquire the adjacent seven-hundred-acre piece that was owned by the archdiocese of Oakland. Along with a friend and real estate broker, Jack Bariteau, we were able to acquire an option on that seven hundred acres.

In the meantime, while we were negotiating this option, we were successful in bringing together a coalition of Signature Properties, which is a local northern California home-building company out of Pleasanton, and the Niclaus Sierra Development Company out of Tampa. Signature and Niclaus Sierra formed a joint venture that acquired basically our interest in the property that we owned and included our option negotiations with the archdiocese of Oakland, so the option and the property all came together as one. We retained an interest in that in terms of what would be the ongoing vineyards and wine operations that this project would put out.

They began to process their project in 1987, through the public hearing system in the county planning process. Just two months ago, in March, they finally received unanimous approval from the county board of supervisors to proceed with their project. The project had evolved a variety of times through the process, but I think when all is said and done it will end up planting about 700 acres of vineyard, it will renovate the old True winery, which is now occupied by Fenestra, and it will deed over 200 acres surrounding the old Ruby Hill winery to Wente Bros. Wente Bros., with the ownership of that 200 acres and the Ruby Hill winery, will proceed to renovate the Ruby Hill winery and plant the 200 acres of the vineyard as part of the project.

Teiser: The Ruby Hill winery itself?

P. Wente: Yes.

Teiser: That was a fine building.

P. Wente: It was a fine building, yes. We believe that is really one of the cornerstones to our investment in this winegrowing region here. It strategically occupies the western end of the winegrowing region. We feel that strategically our sparkling wine cellars, the old Cresta Blanca facility, occupies the south-central portion, and all of Wente Bros. estate winery and vineyard on the eastern side locks down the eastern side fairly well.

What we then set out to do was to broaden the investment base in the Livermore Valley by trying to get the county to change their archaic zoning law that had zoning parcel size outside the city limits at a hundred-acre minimum. That was instituted around 1972, and what we tried to point out to the county was that it was a ridiculous size for zoning; that a hundred acres was not large enough to support a grazing cattle ranch, and it was much too large to encourage individual investment for intensive agriculture, either orchards, vineyards, or any other such intensive agriculture. We understood what they were trying to do, which was to stop parcelization of land and development, but at the same time they were not creating an agricultural environment.

We did a study of the Napa Valley floor, and over 40 percent of the parcels in the Napa Valley floor in the prime winegrowing district are twenty acres or less in size. One of the very significant things about that is that during the late sixties and all the way through the seventies it allowed a vast diversity of investment to come into the Napa Valley and participate in the burden of the wine business, while here in the Livermore Valley you have two major wineries, Wente and Concannon, carrying 90 to 95 percent of all the acreage, and the whole investment is strictly on their shoulders. Should one of them falter, the whole house of cards is likely to collapse. We really believe that we can encourage anywhere from twenty to fifty independent growers to locate here, owning vineyards of a twenty-acre size, and immediately increase the vineyard acreage from four hundred to a thousand acres of independent investment, not any particular one of them solely relying on the fortunes of Wente Bros.

At the same time, we believe that we need to further encourage the type of recreational investment--golf course, equestrian--so we've initiated discussions with some other developers to bring in additional recreational projects to the area. One of the things we've done, again on the twenty-acre vineyard site, is that we got the county to change the zoning, and we took two hundred acres of our own property and put it through the process--a project we call Crane Ridge. It received county approval a year and a half ago, and for the last year and a half we've been working out all the details with the county planning staff in order to bring forth this project to the point of sales. Hopefully within the next month we will receive our final development map from the county, and within the next sixty days we'll receive our final real estate subdivision permit from

the state, and we'll actually have a product to sell in order to test the market for twenty-acre independent vineyard sites.[2]

Teiser: Crane Ridge is going to be twenty-acre vineyard sites?

P. Wente: Yes, each with the opportunity to build a primary residence on it--a one-acre building site. We believe that's where the attractiveness of this market is; this is a primary residential market. Yet if we can take this primary residential market and allow somebody to live the idyllic country farmer life and still be able to conduct their primary job in the San Francisco Bay Area, then we will have created the kind of development--if you would have it at that--that would be very positive for the winegrowing district, rather than helter-skelter suburban development that brings nothing to the romance of the area.

Teiser: Would they be able to build wineries if they wanted?

P. Wente: Yes. Each of these parcels would be allowed to have a winery and a small tasting room. We're hoping that this will be a success. We've obviously run into a slow market, which has been rather difficult, but such is life in the cycles of business.

Earthquake Damage, 1980

Teiser: I want to put in a mention of the earthquake damage of 1989. Was that a notable occurrence?

P. Wente: It was not a particularly notable occurrence for us. January 1980 is when we were hit with severe earthquake damage. There was a quake on the Greenville fault here in Livermore about three miles epicenter from the winery. Every stainless steel tank in the winery that had wine in it was severely damaged. We lost thirty to forty thousand gallons of wine down the gutters. We had several of our glass-lined tanks--our old bottling tanks--tip over and burst open. We lost a minimal amount of cased inventory, fortunately; we found that we only lost several hundred cases of cased inventory. We were very fortunate in terms of overall wine loss. We had probably four million gallons in the winery at the time, so to lose thirty or forty thousand gallons was not substantial. We had 175,000 cases of cased inventory, so to lose a couple of hundred cases there was not substantial.

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[2]The permit was granted.

But the dollar damage in terms of the structure of the stainless steel tanks probably ended up running us in the long term maybe three million dollars.

Teiser: Were you covered?

P. Wente: No. We spent about two million dollars in repairs, and we still have substantial amount of damage that has never been repaired. The only problem with it is that it's still wine-tight, but it's substantially weakened, and if there were another such occurrence it could fail.

Teiser: Did you strengthen some?

P. Wente: The ones we repaired and the ones that weren't damaged we strengthened. We did extensive work with Valley Foundry, Santa Rosa Stainless Steel, and the University of California at Berkeley in determining at what level it was practical and economical to strengthen tanks. They did a lot of research for the industry and in those term were very helpful. Valley Foundry couldn't have been better about the whole thing and worked with us very closely to rebuild a lot of our tanks.

Grape Sources and Nurseries

Teiser: What percentage of your grapes and wine do you produce from your own properties?

P. Wente: Let's say from the 1990 vintage, 100 percent of the wines we produced would either be from our vineyards or vineyards that we managed--that we have a contractual arrangement for, and we do all the farming operations, so it qualifies as estate-grown or estate-bottled wines. We're actually selling off this year close to two thousand tons, and maybe even more than that, to other wineries, so we're becoming a substantial grape seller, and that's also been one of our primary plans to go along with this whole creation of a winegrowing district, both for Monterey and Livermore. We feel it's equally important to market the quality of our vineyards as it is to market the quality of our brand name. Therefore we also believe that if Livermore Valley is ever to take its place as a noted winegrowing district, noted wines have to be made from it. They have to come from wineries other than those just here in the valley, so one of our primary projects is to try to find wineries that are interested in

producing wines made from Livermore Valley grapes and to place those grapes with those wineries.

Teiser: You do the same in Monterey County?

P. Wente: Yes, we do. We believe the same promotional values exist on that vineyard.

Teiser: Do you buy wine?

P. Wente: Through the eighties we did a variety of things, from buying grapes to buying wine. One of the primary wines we used to buy was Cabernet, because our Cabernet vineyards weren't planted here until about '82. We didn't get our first vintage of Cabernet out on a national release basis for eight years, so Cabernet was pretty much purchased grapes or purchased wines. But now all the wines we are selling are coming from our own vineyards or these vineyards such as the Raboli vineyard that we operate and have a long-term management contract with.

Teiser: So you have a great deal of control. This leads in a way to your long-established nursery business. Where are your nurseries?

P. Wente: Our nurseries, which are probably more correctly termed "registered increase blocks," are in the Arroyo Seco vineyard in Monterey County or Salinas Valley. If anything, we have cut down on our overall certified nursery acreage, and in the last couple of years we've gone through a little bit of change. We're trying to bring in some varieties that we consider might be gaining more popularity or more interest. We've planted some of the Rhone varietals such as Sirah, Grenache, Viognier, Marsanne. We've also are looking into planting some of the Italian primary varieties such as Nebbiolo, Sangiovese, Dolcetto, Barbera. We're looking also at Pinot gris, which is not necessarily of any particular country of origin. It's like Pinot blanc, a knock-off of Pinot noir, and they grow it in Italy, Austria, Hungary, Burgundy, and also in Alsace.

Teiser: It was very popular in Italy some years ago, and I don't know whether it's maintained its popularity there or not.

P. Wente: It has, although it's kind of controversial subject. To my mind the Italians are selling a lot of what they call Pinot Grigio to the United States. However, I think there are some serious doubts that it is all really produced out of Pinot gris.

We're trying to keep our nurseries dynamic. The last two years we've paid a lot of attention to them, but I will say that

we probably were a little bit remiss in keeping them up to date over the five previous years.

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Teiser: The nurseries must give you some prestige. I know some people have said with pride that their stock had come from your family.

P. Wente: I agree. I think there is a lot of prestige in having clones named after us, although I don't know how scientific that really is, if there is such a thing as the Wente clone. There's a nomenclature going around the industry on Chardonnay, Sauvignon blanc, and Sémillon that there is a Wente clone of those three varieties. We have done a lot, I think, for the industry in the amount of cuttings we have put out of our nursery and how hard we have worked, especially in the early days with the Foundation Plant Service and propagating a lot of these clones. I think we will have a rededicated effort to that in the future.

Teiser: You worked with some chemical companies or some other private companies, too?

P. Wente: We've always done some experimental work in the past. When I was fresh out of college we had a lot of test plots going on, both with the University and a variety of chemical companies, from FMC to Dow and other people, testing nematicides, fungicides, and other things. We continue to do that on a real minor scale. I can't think of any major experimental blocks that we have going right now with anybody. We have really cut back on our reliance on chemicals. We would just as soon use a grape mildicide, whether it's sulfur or some other product, a variety of brand names, and try to avoid most of the insecticides, herbicides, and other things as much as we possibly can. We have quit fumigating soils for nematodes before planting. At this point all we're doing is rotating crops here in the Livermore Valley with alfalfa for four or five years and then going back in with vines and relying on the rootstock to be able to battle the soil-born pests. We think the commercial fumigants are just basically too dangerous to be playing with at this point.

Teiser: Do you grow your own rootstock?

P. Wente: Yes.

Teiser: That puts you in a very strong position, doesn't it?

P. Wente: Well, we've really concentrated on growing a lot of 39-16, 43-43 A x R #1, and St. George. We are starting to grow more Freedom,

5BB, SO4, Teleki 5C, and, oh gee, a couple of other ones. We're not really in a production stage with any of those yet. It's been a long pull trying to get into the production stage with 39-16, and we're there now. We really feel that is the rootstock of the future for Livermore Valley. I don't think it necessarily is for everywhere, but it certainly appears to be the most promising thing, as we discussed earlier, for xiphenima problems.

Teiser: Traditionally rootstock has been developed by separate growers, hasn't it?

P. Wente: There are a lot of nurseries still operating in the state that do a lot to sell bench grafts, rootstocks, rootings, cuttings; you name it, and they'll do it for you.

The Wine Institute and Marketing Orders

Teiser: Would you discuss the industry in general? You've been on the board of the Wine Institute.

P. Wente: Yes, I took my father's seat, so I've been on since March 1977. I've served on the executive committee of the Wine Institute since that time as well. I've participated on the board of directors of what was the marketing order: I was chairman of the California Wine Commission. I was sad to see the demise of the Wine Commission, but those things happen. I also serve on the board of directors of AWARE right now. I'm chairman of the health and social issues committee of the Wine Institute. So I keep my finger in the pie pretty well. [laughs]

Teiser: Is it you or your brother who has been on the social issues--?

P. Wente: He was chairman of the social issues committee for about eight years, and then two years ago I took his place.

Teiser: What do you think about marketing orders in the future?

P. Wente: I think we probably have the power in the next couple of years to put another marketing order together. However, I think the industry seems to be a little bit divisive right now, and I'm not really sure why. We're talking about maybe 250 wineries. The balance of the other 500 wineries aren't really crushing enough tons that they're influencing much. Still, when you consider the overall figures, I think it's the top twelve or fifteen wineries that are crushing 90 percent of the tonnage, so

we're really talking about 10 percent of the tonnage for those other 240 or 230. The numbers are really rather skewed in this business.

To have a voluntary organization probably makes the best statement. If everybody would just pull together, we'd be so much better off. But when you have that big a group, you're going to have a lot of different personalities, and you're always bound to run into some dissension; that's just a fact of life. This is a pluralistic society, and sometimes I'm amazed at how Congress does it.

I think the future of the Wine Institute is still very bright. If anything, I think there is probably an immediate potential for a research marketing order--something to fund: basic research at Fresno State, University of California at Davis, and perhaps some medical research at the same time, which is a field that the industry has never had very concrete funding for, but which I certainly think they would do themselves well to get into. If we can collect some $2 million a year for something like that, I think we should be proud of ourselves. But I think we should be embarrassed with ourselves at the state we're in right now; collecting two, three, four hundred thousand dollars a year, an industry this size should be completely embarrassed.

Teiser: I see a curious parallel. Early on, in the late thirties, there was dissension in the Wine Institute because some members thought too much attention was being paid to small wineries like Wente and others. Some of the big wineries thought the Wine Institute was promoting the small ones because of the romantic aspect and shouldn't do it. Now there is again this small winery versus larger winery antagonism.

P. Wente: The Institute is aware of that, and a lot of it stems from the Wine Commission. The Institute spent about six months doing an industrywide survey. It hired a professional consultant to come in and try to get the pulse of the membership. What it basically showed was that the number one thing that the membership wanted was for the Institute to stay on top of public policy in its various echelons--local, state, and federal government and international public policy--to influence whatever trade barriers might restrict our industry or whatever new type of laws might try to restrict our society.

At the same time they felt that the health, research, and education fields were areas that the industry was best off to participate in on an industrywide basis as well. They had a

fairly strong feeling that those should be things that the Institute or a trade organization should take care of.

There was a very mixed feeling on promotion. I think the general bottom line that was decided was that the Institute would no longer conduct any type of promotional activities; the promotion of a branded product is best left to the brands. It's not like strawberries or table grapes or raisins or the Milk Advisory Board, where it's a commodity product. Wine is not a commodity product, and it never will be.

Teiser: Going back again, after Repeal there was a very effective industrywide promotion, including small wineries.

P. Wente: At that time there weren't really any big, instant wineries. There were a lot of people who all of a sudden started shipping tons of wine around. It took until the late thirties or early forties before things really sorted out into a few larger players. I think when you have almost a start-up industry, there's a lot of opportunity for industrywide promotions, and I think the Institute, even in the fifties, sixties, and seventies did some nice generalized promotions. But moving away from things like the California Wine Queen, Wine Week, and other things, the industry has become a lot more sophisticated than that. I think the awareness of the brands and the power of the individual brands--when you consider that Gallo sells over 30 percent of all the wine sold in the United States, there's tremendous power in individual brands. Generic marketing becomes difficult at that stage.

We did a generic marketing program for the Wine Commission. We spent $700,000 in one year, and we picked out several test markets. I believe it was Austin, Texas; Denver, Colorado; and one other one. It showed that we did have a significant effect. We did some limited radio and television advertising, newspaper and publications, and saturation in the marketplace. There was a measurable effect, though not necessarily totally significant in a statistical analysis in all cases. What it also showed was that to roll out such a program nationwide and to have a substantial effect would have cost the industry on the order of anywhere from fifteen to twenty million dollars. We could have had a very effective generic wine-marketing program, and we would have had to sustain it for five to ten years.

That should say something very positive to the industry. If the industry was really interested in its long-term health they might well be advised to do something like that, but this industry has never raised that kind of money and likely never will. There are two many mavericks, and there is too much

weight resting on one brand. If we were going to raise fifteen million dollars, the Gallos would probably be coming up with seven million of it. I'm not sure they're willing to spend seven million dollars at that point to everybody else's benefit. I mean, they've always been very generous in funding most of the activities of the Wine Institute, the Wine Commission, and the industry affairs. I think it's an unfair burden, actually, to ask one company to put up that much, particularly when they may represent 30 or 35 percent of the volume but don't represent the same amount of the revenue. Most of the statistics today show that the premium wine segment has achieved some 60 percent of the revenue now, even though it's still only 35 or 40 percent of the volume.

Teiser: I keep asking if there wouldn't be an advantage to all the wine industry if somehow generic wines of the Central Valley were promoted harder, just to keep people drinking wine.

P. Wente: Like the French system or the Italian system. I would agree with you on the basis of concept, but you should probably take reasonable varieties that can be grown in those areas, things like Olmo made--Ruby cabernet. His Ruby cab is really a nice, heavy-bodied red wine out of the Central Valley. Maybe we should be looking at things like the Italians do, like Trebbiano, or like the French Muscadelle, or wines from the Midi. They're not trying to grow Chardonnay or Pinot noir in the south of France in order to produce the average table wine, but they are growing grape varieties that produce average table wine. They market it in milk crates and put it by your back door, you drink the bottles and put them back out in the milk crate, and a guy comes and takes them away again. (This is strictly my imagination.)

That would be wonderful, and that's probably what we could accomplish if we all agreed to a twenty-million-dollar-a-year generic wine program. However, I guess we're all just too short-sighted and profit-oriented--profit-oriented with tongue in cheek, because we're not doing anything to change the basic societal outlook of the U.S. I think until we do--one of my favorite analogies is that wine is only heavily consumed in wine-producing regions, and I think if you look around the world you'll find that to be true. In Chile they drink a lot of wine, but they grow a lot of wine. In California we drink a lot of wine. If the rest of the United States drank wine like California does [per capita consumption would be a lot higher]. [tape off; phone interruption]

Teiser: You've been on the county flood control and water conservation board. Does that fit in with your whole planning interest?

P. Wente: I think water certainly is a very important topic, and it's very important to us, but I also think it's been a family tradition to have some civic volunteerism, and this has been my part.

Teiser: Similarly, I suppose your reports in the Wines and Vines annual vineyard issue was a--

P. Wente: I did that because, at least for quite a long time, there was nobody else in the Livermore Valley who was going to fill that out. We didn't have a farm advisor; we're a small district, and there was nobody else to take that on. Phil Hiaring probably didn't know where else to go. It's a lot like when I was appointed to the regional water quality control board by Governor [Jerry] Brown and served there for seven years. I did that more out of interest. I thought it was a fascinating position, and I learned a lot. I hope I gave as much back as I gained, but I certainly gained a lot from the experience.

Teiser: Are you on any other public boards?

P. Wente: No, at this time I'm not.

Visions for the Future

Teiser: Is there more that you'd like to say?

P. Wente: We talked a lot about where we've come from, the vision of Wente Bros., and where we're going. I really feel like an individual who's probably fairly average. I don't claim to have been a scholar or a stellar achiever at the University. However, I did well, I got out, and I did what I had to do. What I would really like to see in the University is a lot more emphasis from them on the education of their students, at least in this field, in terms of marketing, worldwide international vision of the product, the health and social issues side of the product. I don't think that these students are prepared to be in the wine "business." I was prepared to make wine, but I knew nothing of the wine business. There should be a whole other section of that department that is mandatory for these students to be educated with when they come out.

All the things we're going through now in terms of vision and direction for the winery are things that I should have done fifteen years ago. They're visions that I should have developed at school, or at least had images put in my mind a little bit,

been challenged by seeing operations from France and Italy, or have guest lecturers like Piero Antinori, Robert Mondavi, or some great visionary of the industry who would pique our curiosity and our minds to be able to put together a scenario like we just talked about--how you would get great everyday table wines out of the Central Valley and how we would market these to the acceptance of everybody, and not to have one segment of our society with its nose so high up in the air they can't see, while the other segment of our society disdains them. How do you bring all these people together, and how do you create a product that's going to mesh in this?

For me it's been difficult to mesh all of the production side of what I learned in my life with the vision of where I wanted the family business to go. As I said earlier, I think that's the one side of communicating with my father that I completely missed. Eric and Carolyn and I have kind of created our own direction or image of where we think we want the family to go, although based somewhat on what we perceived as the past history from things like reading your oral history with Ernest and that type of thing.

We believe that we want to be the best. We want to produce the best wine, and we want to grow it ourselves. We want to grow as a company but not necessarily in volume as much as in prestige and revenue.

ERIC P. WENTE

Eric Wente was born in Livermore in 1951, the elder son of Jean R. and Karl L. Wente. Having attended the local schools and worked after school and during vacations on his family property, he continued his education at Stanford University, receiving a B.S. in chemistry. He went on to the University of California at Davis to study viticulture and enology and obtained a graduate degree in food science. With his brother, he assumed leadership of Wente Bros. following the death of their father in 1977. He became president, with special responsibility for production management.

The interview took place in his office at the estate winery.

Regional Oral History Office
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Berkeley, California 94720

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Eric P Wente - Err Peter Wente

Date of birth 25 June 1951 Birthplace Livermore, Calif.

Father's full name Karl Laird Wente

Occupation Vintner Birthplace Livermore Calif.

Mother's full name Eugenia Robinson Wente

Occupation Vintner Birthplace Corcoran, Calif.

Your spouse Arel Sudduth Wente

Your children Christine Bess Wente
Karl Daniel Wente

Where did you grow up? Livermore, Calif.

Present community Livermore, Calif

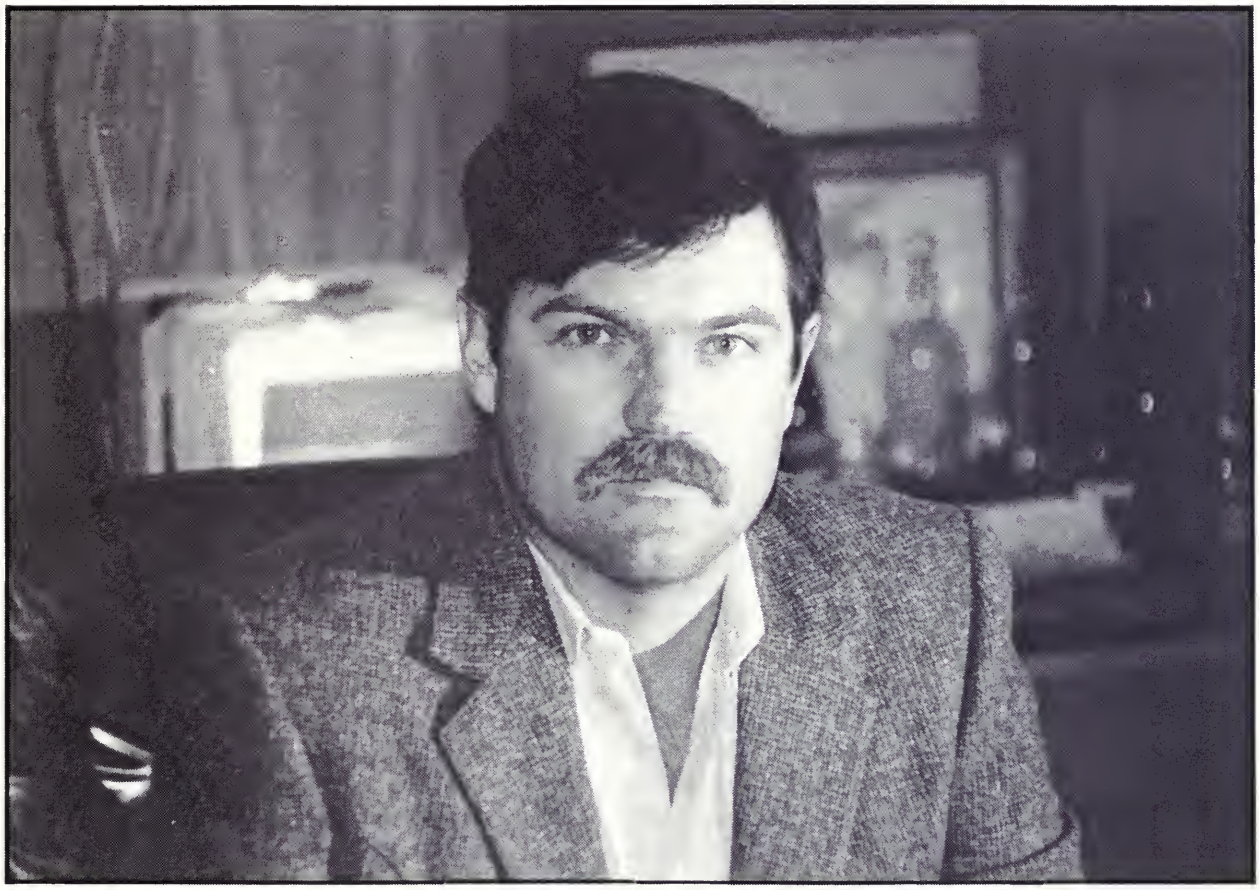
Education Livermore High School graduate, B.S. in Chemistry Stanford Univ., M.S. - Food Science U.C. Davis

Occupation(s). Vintner

Areas of expertise Winemaking, Production Mngmt, General Winery Mngmt., Finance, Health & Social Issues, International Sales

Other interests or activities Tennis, Sailing, riding, skiing

Organizations in which you are active Wine Institute, Bohemian Club



Eric Wente, circa 1990

INTERVIEW WITH ERIC P. WENTE

SCHOOL AND COLLEGE YEARS, 1951-1974

[Date of Interview: June 27, 1991]##

Teiser: You and Phil are only a year apart, aren't you?

Eric Wente: Yes, sixteen to seventeen months.

Teiser: Where and when were you born?

E. Wente: I was born here in Livermore on June 25, 1951. I believe I was born at St. Paul's Hospital.

Teiser: Where did your family live?

E. Wente: When the winery was started and where my grandfather was brought up was within a hundred yards of where we are sitting now. The house was just off to my left about a hundred yards. In about 1925 to 1927, Uncle Herman built a house across the street from the winery here, and my grandfather built a house at the corner of what is now Wente Street and Marina. So my father was born and raised in the house over off of Marina. Then when my father first got married to my mother, he lived in Louis Mel's old house, which is about a mile from here, half way between here and my grandfather's house, where Phil now lives.

We lived in the old Mel house until I was ten years old, and then in 1961 my parents built a new house up the hill a little bit from the Mel house in the same area. I lived in that house from 1961 until going away to school and coming back and doing our own thing, my wife and I.

Teiser: Where did you go to school in Livermore?

E. Wente: I went to grammar school and high school in Livermore. I attended Livermore High, where my grandfather and great-aunts and uncles all attended high school. My father attended high school there, and Phil, Carolyn, and I all attended high school there. At this point, both of my kids are in high school there.

Teiser: Did you have any particular interests while you were in school?

E. Wente: Philip and I were both in 4-H when we were in grammar school. We raised steers and took them down to the local fair once a year--those types of projects. In high school I played sports. A lot of our time that we weren't in school or playing sports, we worked for our grandfather on the cattle ranch or worked a lot of days here in the vineyards and things like that. There were lots of things to keep busy.

Teiser: Did you work around the winery in high school?

E. Wente: No, we only worked in the vineyards and the cattle ranch in high school. It was easier, because at that time we were working six days a week in the vineyard, and Granddad didn't mind working any time he could get hold of somebody to work. That fit in with the school schedule more than the winery, which runs on a much more standard production schedule then and now--five days a week, eight to four-thirty (now seven to five-thirty). That's a lot harder to fit in than, "Okay, I have this Saturday and next Saturday free, so this is what I want to do."

Teiser: What did you do in the vineyards?

E. Wente: Drive a tractor, change sprinkler pipe, different projects in the farm shop. For Granddad it would be chase cows, set fence, repair fence, haul livestock around, spray livestock--sort of general farm and ranch work.

Teiser: Did your interests ever draw you more towards livestock than wine?

E. Wente: No, not really. I still ride horses a lot and still enjoy the whole activity. Probably one of the things in school that I was most interested in was chemistry, and I don't really know why I got started in it. Pretty much by the time I was starting high school I had my mind made up that what I wanted to study was chemistry, so in college that's what I majored in. At the time it really wasn't because I thought that was going to be a good foundation for being in the wine business; it was just that I wanted to study chemistry.

Teiser: Your father was interested in chemistry, too, wasn't he?

E. Wente: Yes, I think he was a microbiology major.

Teiser: Didn't he study chemistry at Stanford?

E. Wente: Yes. To be a microbiology major, you had to study chemistry. It's like all pre-meds have to take chemistry up to a certain level. Most science majors require you to take a certain amount of chemistry. But I don't believe he was a specific chemistry major in school.

Teiser: Did you take any trips or anything before you went to Stanford? Did you have a break before high school and college?

E. Wente: The usual three months in the summer, but no, I didn't take six months or a year off and do something. I just went straight on. I guess it was after my junior year in high school that as a family we took a month trip to Europe, which was more in terms of touring all the major cities as opposed to, "Let's go look at wineries," or "Let's be involved in wine activities." Other than that, no, it was pretty much every summer working in the vineyards. I took some time off for vacation and maybe went up to Granddad's house at Tahoe, but otherwise there wasn't any time off.

Stanford University, 1969-1973

Teiser: What year did you go to Stanford?

E. Wente: I started at Stanford in 1969 and graduated in the winter quarter of 1973.

Teiser: Did you enjoy Stanford in any special way?

E. Wente: It was a good experience, and I enjoyed it very much. I don't know if you could say anybody is an average student or not an average student, not necessarily in grade-point averages but just in what you do. I think I by and large had a reasonably typical experience. I was a chemistry major and spent a lot of time in the labs there. One of the things you find out, versus being an English major, is that chemistry majors spent a huge amount of time in labs for not very many units. The old chemistry building is now closed; the last earthquake pretty much finished off the occupancy, and I don't know what they're going to do with it.

I lived in the dorms as a freshman, and I lived in a fraternity house for the next three years.

Teiser: What was your fraternity?

E. Wente: Zeta Psi. It's an institution that's no longer active on campus at Stanford. I spent six months living in England as part of the Stanford overseas program in the summer and fall of 1972, and that was a good experience.

Teiser: Did you study chemistry there, too?

E. Wente: No, Stanford would bring professors from Stanford to the overseas campus, but typically it leaned more towards history, political science, communications--things that you could get a broader spectrum of people into. There weren't any chemistry classes per se offered there.

Teiser: Then you came back to the campus?

E. Wente: Exactly. I came back for one quarter. Having had the summer quarter that year, and with all the rest of the units I had accumulated, all I needed in winter quarter of 1973 was one three-unit class to complete my major. So I went to school for the winter quarter and didn't go to school for spring quarter because I didn't need the additional units.

Teiser: By the time you started studying chemistry at Stanford, did you make a connection with the wine industry or winemaking?

E. Wente: Actually, the entire time I was going to school at Stanford I still worked in the vineyards and on the cattle ranch; I didn't ever work inside the winery until after I got out of Davis. During the time I was at Stanford, when we were traveling in England I visited one winery in Switzerland for an afternoon, and that was about the extent of any winery visits. Until about two years ago I had never even visited any wineries in France, and maybe one or two wineries in Germany at different points, so by and large I don't have all that much experience outside of California in what wineries look like, different types of winemaking techniques, and that type of thing.

Teiser: When you graduated, you went to Davis?

E. Wente: I spent six months between Stanford and Davis--spring quarter and a summer--working here. That was my first sort of inside job; I was bookkeeper for six months here.

Teiser: Had you had any experience in business management?

E. Wente: As controller or chief financial officer, no, I was not doing that; I was a bookkeeper. At that point we were running on a totally hand system, so you spent most of your time writing into the ledgers what check was issued, who it was issued to, the amount. It was a classical double-entry bookkeeping system, where you kept your accounts in balance, and there was a written system and chart of accounts. If you studied it a little bit, it wasn't too hard to figure out how to make the system work. At the end of the year the auditors would come in and make all the journal entries and adjustments, and you'd book those and close it out. It was more of a rote task than needing a lot of creative business management or something else to deal with it.

Teiser: Was it good to know that, though?

E. Wente: It was good to understand the systems of the operation and how things work. I think it's been a valuable experience overall in understanding what's behind the scenes.

Teiser: Was this your father's decision as to what you should do?

E. Wente: Actually, at that point in time what I was looking for was a job for six months, and he just turned over bookkeepers, so he was looking around and figured that I would make a good fill-in until he could get organized with a new bookkeeper. So I kept books through the summer, and by the end of the summer he had found somebody. I spent the first three months while I was at Davis driving back on Thursdays, when I didn't have any class, to make sure that she was figuring out how to keep the books properly and get it all lined up.

Teiser: So you had some supervisory experience, too.

E. Wente: A little bit.

UC Davis, 1973-1974

Teiser: What did you do at Davis? What did you study especially?

E. Wente: I was in viticulture and enology.

Teiser: Who did you work with?

E. Wente: The research project I had as part of obtaining my degree I did for Professor [Harold W.] Berg and his assistant, Min Akioshi. I started at Davis in September of 1973, and I managed to get a

master's degree in one year. I think I was probably one of the few people who did that; it's usually a two-year program. Based on all the chemistry I had had at Stanford--and for a lot of the other prerequisites they wanted for a master's degree I was able to show I had already had quite a bit of graduate level biochemistry. The few courses that I couldn't cover, I picked up outside of the enology department while I was at Davis, and then I took almost every enology and viticulture class, except that I didn't take the distilling class from Jim [Dr. James F.] Guymon, which I wish I had done. But I couldn't fit them all in, and that wasn't one that I needed to graduate.

Teiser: You certainly must have gone well prepared, at least with a good speaking acquaintance with viticulture and with your chemistry.

E. Wente: Yes. You get into the viticulture classes at Davis, and the light sort of goes on for why you were doing some of the things that you were doing working in the vineyard: "Oh, okay, I understand what the science is behind it, as opposed to the practical effects of it." It's a little bit like when they talked about winemaking at Davis and what they were teaching about fermentation. They were not really making too much of which is the suction end of a pump and how you get the wine or juice from one tank to the next and things like that. Those were all sort of processes that weren't really covered. But you spent a lot of time studying what types of yeast did produce what types of fermentations or byproducts, what all the metabolic cycles were, and this type of thing, which is good background, but it's not something that I use terribly often. The more practical side of it at this point is how you get the production system to flow the way you want it to.

WENTE BROS., 1974-1991

Final Years Under Karl L. Wente, 1974-1977

Teiser: When did you first get your experience in the winery?

E. Wente: In 1974 I got back from school, and Dad put me in the lab. He said, "You now know all the latest techniques and analyses, so here's the lab. You run that." I moved out of Davis about the second or third of September and started back here right after Labor Day. I started into the first harvest here and started learning the basic systems of how we were making wine and how all the processing activities went through here at Wente Bros. I spent the next couple of years doing that and being in effect the winemaker production manager for Wente Bros.

Teiser: When was that?

E. Wente: From 1974 until 1977.

Teiser: Was your father a hard taskmaster?

E. Wente: Oh, yes. He had the classic Monday morning routine of, "Let's get going for the week." He wanted to have a lot of ground covered, and he'd lay out what he wanted done. If you went away and did it, that was great, and if it wasn't getting done fast enough, it was, "Come on, let's get the balloon off the ground and get going here." That was one of his favorite sayings. He wanted everybody to keep hustling; that was one of his major prerequisites, that everybody had to be hustling. If you were walking across the yard, "Walk like you mean to get to the other side." "Don't amble around; I want to see people who are moving like they mean to get where they are going and intend to do something when they get there."

Teiser: Did he plan a series of jobs for you with the idea of your being in charge of production entirely? What was his plan for you?

E. Wente: I don't know too much of it. Working in grade school, high school, and college, by and large the farm area was the easiest to work in because there was a lot of stuff that you could add on during that time. Like during the summer we did a lot of tractor driving, but you didn't need the tractor drivers a lot of the rest of the year anyway, so it was sort of a nice addition that we could cover a lot of ground in the summer driving a tractor. But when you're running the winery and the bottling lines and stuff on an ongoing basis, there didn't turn out to be as much need, really, or space and flexibility, so I think it wound up that the best way to deal with things was working outside.

Coming back from school, having studied more heavily the winemaking side and chemistry background, it seemed like the natural thing to start into the production activities. I was doing that fairly steadily, really without all that much change in what I was doing from when I started to when he died. At that point there was a fairly radical change in what I was doing compared to the three years after I came back from Davis. It was really about two and a half years, from September of 1974 to January of 1977. During those three harvests, '74, '75, '76, we were just making the wine, getting the wine through the whole program and into the bottle, onto the loading dock, and keeping all that area running.

Teiser: In that period, who set the criteria? Who tasted, for one thing?

E. Wente: Then as now it was a tasting committee for a lot of things. Each year at the end of harvest we'd review all the wines that we had made. You'd have the vineyard managers, the winemaking and production people. For example, at that time it would have been Cecil Aguirre, who was running our vineyards in Livermore; Ralph Riva, who was then running our vineyards in Greenfield--if Ralph happened to be up during a given tasting, myself, Dad, Bob Detjens, our plant engineer, and then depending who else was around. There might have been other people, including Granddad; he came to almost all the tastings.

Teiser: Your grandfather participated in the tastings?

E. Wente: Yes, virtually always he did. After Philip was out of school he started participating in the tastings. So there was a group participating in them. If there was any sort of final decision

that needed to be made that wasn't a consensus, at that point Dad was making the decisions. He had the ultimate view of what he wanted to achieve, so if was a matter of choosing between this or that, that was typically his decision and went from there.

Expansion

Teiser: Could you perceive what your father was looking for? What were his goals for the winery, for the wines, for production?

E. Wente: Between him and Grandfather, they were intent on expanding the size of the business--things like the acquisition of the property in Greenfield. They were looking ahead and having some concern at that time about how long they might actually be able to have a significant farming and winery operation in Livermore, so in the early sixties, about 1961 and 1962, they had started purchasing property down in Greenfield and started to develop that into vineyard. By the 1970s, it looked like the situation in Livermore was a little bit more stable. There was never any discussion at the point when I was out of school about moving out of Livermore. We were looking at how we could expand. In point of fact, we were just starting into a fairly major expansion, where we were seeing our sales grow fairly significantly. We were in a fairly big expansion mode for production activities, and we were trying to focus on being able to make top-quality wine, the major focus on white wine. Still the major portion of our business is white wine.

In the middle sixties, stainless steel was just coming on as being available and useful for tanks and jacketed fermenters. We had some of the first jacketed fermenters that Valley Foundry built. I can remember in the late fifties and early sixties still having a lot of the grapes delivered in lug boxes and dumping the lug boxes into the crushers. So in the sixties there was a lot of change in the winery and change from equipment that had been there for quite some time.

By 1974, coming back from school, we had some major rehab and revamping of things. I remember in the early sixties helping during the summer to tear down the old winery building--an "inside" job, if you will. We tore down the old redwood winery building and built the first of our tilt-up barrel rooms. In 1975 and 1976 we demolished the last of what was to me the older winery. The buildings had been built in the thirties, actually--not any of the old 1883-vintage buildings--and

building it all back up with the concrete tilt-up that we have now. That whole process had been started in the early sixties and was being carried through to the current configuration of the winery and buildings. We basically finished building it out in about 1980 or 1981.

Teiser: Your father's death was pretty much in the middle of that expansion, then. Did you know what he was planning?

E. Wente: Well, the basic flow of business was fairly obvious. At the time, in the seventies, our major products were Grey Riesling and Le Blanc de Blancs--the Chenin Blanc. That was where the wine popularity was at the time. We had been making Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay varietal wines since Repeal. We were probably the first producers and shippers of varietal Sauvignon Blanc and Chardonnay after Repeal. They continued throughout, and today particularly Chardonnay is a major part of our line.

The old-style California wineries used to have huge product lines. If you'd see all the products on the shelf, you could have two foot of shelf for all the products. You'd have chablis, burgundy, rosé, and then Chenin Blanc, Grey Riesling, Johannisberg Riesling, Pinot Blanc, Petite Sirah, Pinot Noir, Zinfandel, Cabernet, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon, Chateau Wente, Late Harvest Riesling, and in the late forties and early fifties we were making some Ugni Blanc. We had lots of different things that we were doing. Over the years we've been bringing the size of the product line down and focusing more, but in the mid-seventies we were on a fairly heavy expansion program as our sales of all of our wines were growing quite rapidly at that point.

Teiser: I was remembering Ugni Blanc because I read recently about a planting of Trebbiano toscano in the Livermore Valley. It's the same thing, isn't it?

E. Wente: Yes. Ugni blanc or Trebbiano are the same grape varieties. [Planted by] Ivan Tamas. As far as I know it was the first shipment of a Trebbiano label.

Teiser: Getting back to your varieties, I don't suppose it was a problem, because you were used to it, but in a winery producing so many wines, and bottling and warehousing--

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Teiser: Was it a big job to keep that many wines going?

E. Wente: The classic answer is yes and no. When I got back from school, the systems were already in place on most of that, and everybody was pretty well organized on how we were doing it. Clearly there were a few items that were big, big volume items, and a lot of other items were a lot smaller in size. At that time our business was virtually all U.S. business and virtually all through one sales channel into the U.S., so it was a little bit simpler than business is today.

Teiser: Parrott & Co.?

E. Wente: Yes. This morning one of the reasons why I was a little bit late is that we had just gotten an inquiry for an export project, and we're trying to figure out how we can get the pricing and the delivery and everything lined up. We're seeing more and more of our business today in odd lots--not odd lots, but it's in more individually planned and executed wines. Let's say that Sauvignon Blanc--right now by our terminology it would be our estate-grown Sauvignon Blanc blend, but for Canada it requires a CSPC number on it; CSPC is the Product Code terminology for Canada. For Finland it requires different labeling on the outside of the case; for selling to the U.S. military it requires a different shipping program. All of these things make it more difficult today. There are many, many more transactions today to get the job done than there were in the mid-seventies and early eighties. I would phrase it that life was simpler then than it is now.

Teiser: Even though you have fewer wines?

E. Wente: Even though we have fewer wines. At that time you had ten wines but smaller lots, and you bottled the whole quantity when it was ready to bottle. Then you put it in the warehouse, and then you shipped against it. When that was gone and the next vintage came up, you bottled the whole quantity again, put it in the warehouse, and you shipped against it. Today we're trying to judge how much wine we should not bottle, in case we get orders that we have to do something different with, or how much we should bottle with no labels on it and keep it in the warehouse and then pick it up and label it for the order. All of these things get to be more time-consuming, more hassle, and more expensive than the mid-seventies, "This week we're going to run all the Sauvignon Blancs and Sémillons for the year. Let's bottle it all and put it in the warehouse. The next week we're going to do half of the Johannisberg Riesling blend, bottle it, and put it in the warehouse. The next week we're going to do rosé." It was a simpler production scheduling situation then, and the efficiencies for operation because of that were better than they are now.

Teiser: You have simplified your wine list. How do you decide what to make and what not to make, what to drop and what to keep?

E. Wente: Several different sources of input. First, you can say there are the things we choose to make because we like to make them. As a wine man, as a wine family, and as a winemaker there are certain things that you say have always been the core of our business, or these are the statement or image that we are trying to make.

Also, one of Grandfather's favorite sayings from time to time was, "Eating is habit forming, a habit that's very hard to break." Therefore you need to make things that people want to buy. You go out and ask what is in the marketplace that people are interested in, what they are buying. Right now, today, Chardonnay, Cabernet, and White Zinfandel in the varietal wines are clearly the most popular. In the mid-1970s, Riesling and Chenin Blanc were the most popular. So you may trend some of your production towards what are the more successful and popular items at the time, but basically, throughout the history of Wente Bros., we have been a coastal vineyard and wine production organization. We're trying to produce what we think are some of the best qualities of wines that can be made in California, according to our opinion of type and style. We're trying to use the best grapes and do the best job in the vineyards that we can, and then do the best job in the winery that we can for the grape varieties.

That's been our focus, and within that focus you say, "What is it that looks like I can sell more of this year? Should I be trending up in my Chardonnay, or should I be trending down in my Chenin Blanc," which is right now the case. Or, in the mid-seventies, "Should I be trending up in Chenin Blanc and basically keeping my Chardonnay sales static because there isn't as much demand for the Chardonnay?" Those are some of the things that you take more of a marketing hat (or telescope) to look at, rather than the production hat (or telescope).

Then you get certain things that there can be discussions about, something like Pinot Blanc: what really is Pinot Blanc right now? It's not totally clear whether what Davis and the industry in California identified twenty years ago as Pinot Blanc and what they would say is Pinot Blanc today are potentially two different things, so you say that maybe Pinot Blanc is not something you want to be in right at the moment. If they change the name and therefore your vineyard becomes something that is not what you were marketing, is that something

you want to put a lot of effort into? The answer is probably no; the risk is too high versus the turnaround.

Gamay Beaujolais is an example. What is Gamay Beaujolais? At one point Gamay Beaujolais was recognized in California as a grape variety. Now it's a clone of Pinot noir. What's real Gamay? Gamay was the name of a grape variety, the Christian Brothers Napa rosé taken off of the Napa Gamay. There are a lot of different things that might change in the product line as the basic wine market matures and changes focus.

Teiser: Do you make wines with proprietary names now?

E. Wente: No. We don't really have anything that I would say is a totally proprietary name, vis à vis--I think one of the old-time famous ones was Paul Masson's Emerald Dry. We don't have any totally proprietary names. We have one that is not quite proprietary, but depending on where you are, if you ask somebody in California what Le Blanc de Blancs is, they will probably say it's a wine from Wente Bros. If you ask somebody in France what it is, they would probably say it was a white wine. Le Blanc de Blancs is probably our version of a proprietary brand right now, but that name is not proprietary to us.

Teiser: There is no Chateau Wente any more?

E. Wente: No more Chateau.

Teiser: Otherwise you use varietal names?

E. Wente: Yes. In the United States right now, we're not even shipping any red or white table wine or, by old parlance, chablis or burgundy. We don't sell any chablis or burgundy in the U.S. Right now we're selling only varietal wines, and we've got still seven or eight: Grey Riesling; Le Blanc de Blancs, which actually qualifies as varietal Chenin Blanc; White Zinfandel; Johannisberg Riesling; Sauvignon Blanc; Chardonnay; Cabernet; Sémillon; Gewürztraminer; Zinfandel; a late-harvest white Riesling; and then our sparkling wine. So we still have a fairly large portfolio; we're not just a Chardonnay and Cabernet house.

Teiser: That would be pretty risky to be wouldn't it?

E. Wente: Yes. I think there are times when it can be very good. If you take White Zinfandel, when it's very hot, that's great, but then you need to start broadening your base if you're going to have life after White Zinfandel. Sutter Home is an example of somebody who is working very hard at that and I think can be

fairly successful at broadening their base from being simply White Zinfandel.

Teiser: Are you experimenting with any others?

E. Wente: We're not experimenting with any new grape varieties at the moment. Our vineyards are planted to the traditional grape varieties: Chardonnay, Cabernet, Sauvignon blanc, Sémillon, still some Ugni blanc, some Chenin blanc, Grey Riesling, Pinot noir, Zinfandel, Merlot, Cabernet franc, Pinot blanc--as we recognize it to be Pinot blanc--Gewürztraminer, White Riesling. I think we have some Colombard here. That's probably about it. That's a fair number of grape varieties as it is.

Teiser: The vineyards in Monterey County have given you flexibility, haven't they?

E. Wente: Yes. Two things happened. Because you have vintages in two different areas, it's the classic situation of not having all your eggs in one basket, so you don't wind up with frost here or down there, for example, wiping out all your crops for the year. It typically doesn't rain the same amount, or you are not necessarily impacted by rain damage the same way. Also, because it is a little bit cooler region down there than it is here, you have different times of harvesting, even if you have the same grape varieties. That gives you the ability to stagger your crush a little bit; you get a chance to string out the period of time. It's not like it all happens to you one day or in one week.

Then because it's cooler down there it gives us an opportunity to grow certain grape varieties there and do very well with them that we really couldn't do so well with here in Livermore.

Teiser: Which?

E. Wente: The White Riesling or Johannisberg Riesling, Gewürztraminer, Pinot noir. Likewise, we think there are certain grape varieties that do much better in Livermore than down there: Sauvignon blanc, Sémillon, Cabernet, Merlot. Chardonnay does very well in both places. You typically get a little bit bigger, richer wine from Livermore, and you get a little more classic chablis style--and I mean that in a comparison to French chablis, white burgundy--higher acid, crisp wine out of Greenfield. It gives us lots of flexibility, lots of opportunities between the two areas.

Teiser: Have you thought of expanding into any other areas ever?

E. Wente: Not seriously. From 1974 to now we've expanding our landholdings fairly substantially. I think you probably heard about that from Philip. In 1977 we expanded our vineyard holdings by 100 acres down in Greenfield, and in 1977 we also expanded our vineyard land up here by 100 acres. In 1981 we expanded our vineyard acreage up here by another 600 acres in one acquisition, and when we acquired the old Cresta Blanca winery it was a total of 315 acres, about 140 of which was plantable to vineyard. So we've added on a significant amount of acreage, in effect well over 1,000 acres since I've been back from school.

Changes, 1977

Teiser: Let me take you back to 1977, the year your father died. You and Philip jumped right into responsibilities, didn't you? I know that your father had been ill earlier, but was his death unanticipated?

E. Wente: Definitely not expected, basically a total surprise to us. Philip was at that time doing a lot of the vineyard management, and I was doing the production management. One of the things that worked in reasonably good stead was that from 1973 to 1977 our bookkeeping system hadn't changed at all, so I knew the basic inner workings of the bookkeeping system. Not that it was a major deal, but just in terms of how the bills flow through, how the checks get paid, where the money comes in and how it goes out. I understood the basics of that.

I think one of the things that was a real lesson is that a good system and good people can do a lot of things. We had a good group of people and still do; a lot of the same people are still here from 1977, now in 1991. We had a good group of people, and everybody was good at what they were doing and were able to continue to be good at what they were doing.

One of the valuable things definitely was that our grandfather was still alive, somebody who had a lot of perspective, a lot of experience, who at that time did not want to be a daily line management operating officer but who would come over every day and still tell you what he thought about what should go on. He'd have his opinions and we'd have ours, and it was a good sounding board and a good reference. You'd come in with some new idea that you thought was great and revolutionary, and he'd say, "Well, go ahead and try it, boys, but I don't really think it's going to work." "Why not?" "I

tried that in 1910, and it didn't work then, so I'm not sure it's going to work now. Has anything significantly changed between then and now that makes you think it's going to work when it didn't work for me?" There was a certain amount of that.

Teiser: I remember that your grandfather insisted that the plantings in Monterey County be on A x R #1. What has happened?

E. Wente: They're still there.

Teiser: No phylloxera there?

E. Wente: We have not found any phylloxera. There's no known phylloxera in any of our vineyards in Monterey. There is phylloxera here, and there are nematodes here. As opposed to Napa, with the major phylloxera problem, right now for Livermore nematode is probably as big a problem for us if not a larger problem than phylloxera. Because of that, we have in the last few years done a lot of vineyard planting in Livermore where it's even on its own roots, because we've been biding our time, waiting for the rootstock programs to pay off with a rootstock that would have some nematode resistance as well as some phylloxera resistance. Let's say that tolerance is a better word, because I don't think you're ever going to find anything that's absolutely resistant. Like it used to be that they said "waterproof" watches, and now they say "water resistant to one hundred feet." It's probably that this will be phylloxera-resistant to five hundred phylloxera per cubic meter of soil, because I don't think you're ever going to get this rootstock to be absolutely, totally impervious to something.

It looks like the University has gotten some things together where there's some fairly good rootstock programs coming on. Also I think people are looking back at a lot of rootstocks that have been around for a long, long time that hadn't been examined that carefully because everybody pretty much got into the A x R #1 programs.

Teiser: Is there hope that there will be a rootstock that is also nematode resistant?

E. Wente: There's some hope. I think nematode right now is going to have to be controlled by farming practice more than rootstock. By and large if you get more vigorous rootstock it's going to do you better [against nematode], but you may not want that for grape quality.

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Teiser: Do you have nematode in Monterey County?

E. Wente: Not in discernible amounts. I think there are some there, but where we are really having problems is here in Livermore. Nematode and phylloxera here in Livermore are big problems, but you learn to live with them. You get vineyards that turn over a little bit faster than you might like to have them, but you get yourself planned out right for it. It's just part of being a farmer.

Sparkling Wine

Teiser: Let's come up to your sparkling wine cellars. Who decided to go into that?

E. Wente: I think we all had thoughts for a long time that a natural outgrowth of the still-wine business, a natural outgrowth of our vineyards in Monterey, would be sparkling wine. Furthermore, our marketing system at that time was not representing any sparkling wine from California or, actually, any sparkling wine at all. So it could offer somewhat of a fit as well in terms of being able to get it through and into the marketplace. The first vintage of sparkling wine that we commercially marketed was the 1980s, but we had made a couple of trial runs as early as 1978.

Teiser: Your father had done some experimenting with sparkling wines, had he not?

E. Wente: He may very well have, but I'm not that aware of what he had done in that area.

Teiser: Did he have sparkling wine in mind when he went into Monterey County?

E. Wente: That I couldn't answer. My impression is that my father and my grandfather went into Monterey County because they thought they had an area there that would behave quite a bit like Livermore. It wound up being a little bit cooler and gave them opportunities to do other things that they hadn't had the ability to do in Livermore.

Teiser: What route do your trucks use in getting from there to here?

E. Wente: They go 101.

Teiser: Where do they cut over?

E. Wente: Right now they go out to 580, down 580 to the 680 interchange, down 680 to south San Jose where it hits 101, down 101 all the way to the Greenfield exit, and right out Elm Avenue to the vineyard. It's a two- or three-hour drive in a truck. Because we have the press facility down there, typically for the grapes in our vineyards we're hauling juice, so we already have control over it. If there's a little traffic or something, you're not sitting there baking it.

Teiser: Back to your sparkling wine production, when you first went into it you were making it in your winery here--in the estate winery?

E. Wente: Yes. We had everything here, and some of our initial experiences were that we were having a hard time communicating that we were serious about being in the sparkling wine business, because everybody just saw Wente Bros. as "Wente Bros., the still-wine operation here." You could point to the wine aging in the warehouse, "There it is, the bottles all stacked up," but it really wasn't making a statement to anybody. Our original plan was to start putting up a sparkling wine cellar down in Monterey at our vineyard there, because we wanted to give a separate concept and identity to it, and also because we were thinking in terms of less hauling things around.

We ultimately came to the conclusion that we would be better served by having it here, for several reasons. One, we weren't recreating the wheel twice in terms of production facilities; two, we really got into looking at the freight rates on things. The best point at which to haul grapes is as juice in this area, because otherwise we would be hauling the champagne bottles down there and it would get to be a bigger deal.

Teiser: You'd have to do warehousing down there.

E. Wente: Yes, the whole thing. Right now, between our sparkling wine cellar and our main cellar here, we're getting the grapes from Monterey and doing the juicing of the grapes in Monterey. We're bringing the juice to the main cellar, where we do the fermentation and the finishing, and then we take the finished wine to the sparkling wine cellar, where we bottle it and age it and do the riddling. Right now we're still disgorging here, but the long-term goal is to move the disgorging line down to Cresta Blanca.

Teiser: Was this a factor in your purchase of the Cresta Blanca property?

E. Wente: No. We bought the Cresta Blanca property basically for the property. We own all of the property, except for where it abuts the Department of Water Resource for the Del Valle dam, and the Sachau family owns some property that abuts Cresta Blanca. We own virtually all the property surrounding Cresta Blanca except on the hillside behind it. We felt at that point that we would have an opportunity for some good vineyard land, the hill land would tie right in with our cattle ranch, and the whole thing made a neat fit.

Actually, it was unfortunate that it had all these buildings on the place. Schenley, after closing it up in 1965, had let it run down rather badly. I guess if you're not going to do anything with it, and it's in a holding pattern and you're not going to spend any money, that's an understandable consequence. But it was in very, very poor condition when we took over, and we didn't know how much of it, in point of fact, we were actually going to be able to keep. It took us a couple of years to sort through everything, decide what was real and what wasn't real in the place. It was a mess.

Teiser: I remember speaking to someone at Schenley about it in the late seventies, and he said, "We're not doing anything. The vineyards aren't bearing; nothing's going on."

E. Wente: The grass and thistle were five feet high in the vineyards. I mean, you had to be careful driving a tractor through the first time, because there might have been a piece of equipment or something in the grass that you didn't know was there. The roofs all leaked, and some of them had just plain rotted and fallen in--natural skylighting. Old equipment that was just not useful at all. We spent a long time tearing things out, hauling them away, getting it all cleaned up, and then we started into the consideration that this might actually make a real nice place because of the tunnels, the main production building, the office. This would make a real nice place for our sparkling wine operation. It would give it a separate identity, be close enough to manage, makes a useful fit with the buildings that are here and the assets that are in place.

So we started in putting it together for our sparkling wine facility, and also we were looking for an over-all facility to be able to make a higher-impact statement about Wente Bros. to the public and to try and set a tone and an image that would be stronger than what we were then setting with the facility here.

This (the main cellars) facility, as I think a good production facility is likely to, tends to look more like one.

Teiser: Is the Cresta Blanca label being used by Guild Wineries & Distilleries at all?

E. Wente: I don't see any of it, but they tell me that it is, and they tell me that they are reasonably successful with it in Japan.

Teiser: Do you wish you had it?

E. Wente: It would be nice to have, yes. We would like very much to have it, but when you get into the economics of what they think they might want for it, versus what we think we could do with it, versus what the real impact of it is--it's one of these things where it's probably more sentimental than what you would actually do with it if you had it.

Teiser: In your sparkling wine production, have you experimented with different yeasts and brandies and so on?

E. Wente: A little bit. Not extensively. We tried a couple of different yeasts; I think we went through six or seven different yeasts. We spent a lot of time researching what people were and were not having success with before running our own trials on it, and then we pretty well settled down to--I don't know the exact name of the strain, but it's an Épernay I or II. We've played a little bit with the blend percentages each year: it's Pinot noir, it's Chardonnay, it's Pinot blanc. Those percentages will change from year to year, but those are the basic grape varieties for it. We've been experimenting with length of time in tirage. Right now we want to get back into being able to do some experimentation with how we handle the wine prior to the tirage bottling of it. We see that it is the single biggest place to make major style changes or create additional complexity and perhaps a little bit more interest in it.

Teiser: Do you make just one style of sparkling wine?

E. Wente: We market one style; we market a brut. We have had in the past some Blanc de Noir that we've marketed, and right now we have basically available through our tasting room what you might call an LD, a late disgorged 1982 vintage that we just disgorged, so it's been a long time on the yeast.

Teiser: I should say. How did it turn out?

E. Wente: It's quite nice. We're quite pleased with how it's turned out. We see that we have a lot more that we could learn about the

fine-tuning of the sparkling wine business. The basic "How can I get a good quality product out?" I feel very comfortable with. To make improvements--to go from 80 to 90 percent is easier than to go from 90 to 95 percent, which is easier than going from 95 to 100 percent. The more you try and fine-tune, each little movement takes increasing effort. At this time we are right at a plateau where we need to make some decisions on how we see things to move ahead and try to make it up the next hurdle in terms of what we would like to see for our style and quality.

Teiser: What percentage of your production is sparkling wine?

E. Wente: Actually, sparkling wine is a very small percentage of our total business. [uses calculator] It's about 2 to 3 percent.

Teiser: But it's more significant than that from the point of view of prestige?

E. Wente: Yes and no. From the point of view of prestige, probably where the impact is the extent to which people are visiting our sparkling wine cellar and seeing Wente Bros. sparkling wine, and that makes a high impact. If you were to ask your average wine buyer in Chicago, Illinois, I would bet you that they probably don't know, even after all the time and effort that we put into it, that we make sparkling wine.

Teiser: Do you promote it?

E. Wente: We've done a lot. We've done different marketing and advertising strategies and public relations strategies on it. The sparkling wine business is getting more and more difficult, I think.

Teiser: The total is down, isn't it?

E. Wente: And the number of competitors is up. A lot of the competitors have extremely deep pockets, I would phrase it, and also probably have a stronger commitment to the sparkling wine business than we would, realistically. If you ask what the number one thing is for Wente Bros., it is still wine, our traditional Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Grey Riesling, Cabernet business. For us, sparkling wine was and is and (never say ever or never) is probably going to be secondary to the still wine business.

Changes Since 1980

Teiser: Your general growth, in addition to the acreage, has been up in recent years?

E. Wente: Actually, our total shipments of case goods are less than half right now what they were in 1980.

Teiser: How did that happen?

E. Wente: Well, we've changed our style and focus of what we are doing. It's the classic thing of there being less than ten wineries in the Napa Valley in 1965, and how many are there today? Over two hundred, I think. What we're seeing is that, given the current wine market, what we want is a different positioning within that market from what we had in 1980. In the late seventies and early eighties in California, for example, Grey Riesling was everywhere. Every wine list of every fish restaurant in San Francisco had Grey Riesling on it. That was automatic, just about the first thing they put on the wine list. Grey Riesling right now is not that popular an item.

Teiser: What do you think happened?

E. Wente: I think it's the concept of Chardonnay and Cabernet as being the top wine types, and then the concept, "If I'm really going to be a wine drinker, I'm going to drink the best, so I'm going to drink Chardonnay and Cabernet." I think that, plus the so-called "fighting varietal" routine on Chardonnay and Cabernet. Basically, to make good Grey Riesling costs a fair amount of money if you're going to grow the grapes in good areas. Right now our Grey Riesling and our Le Blanc de Blancs, based on grapes coming from our own vineyards, are in the stores at the same price as a lot of the fighting varietal Chardonnays. At that point, if you have a choice between Wente Bros. and somebody else, you might say, "I really like Wente Bros.," but then there's Wente Bros. Grey Riesling, and there's somebody else's Chardonnay at the same price. So you say, "Chardonnay is where it's really at, so I'm going to take the Chardonnay because I'm more comfortable with the fact that I have Chardonnay on the label than I am Grey Riesling, unless I know it."

The Grey Riesling franchise is an aging franchise, and the new drinkers are doing a typical thing: "If my father drank Grey Riesling, then I'm probably going to drink something else anyway." It's that type of marketing syndrome--"My father drove a Chevrolet, so I'm going to drive a Ford"--is probably more

true than not, however you want to choose it, for the average consumer. Our dollars of business are better today; our dollars of business have grown. Our sales are less than half, but our dollars of business are more. Today our total dollars that are Wente dollars are greater than in 1980.

Teiser: That's a neat trick.

E. Wente: It's both the way the business is going, and it's inflation and everything else. But that's been our focus, and our focus today is to broaden our base of business as well. Our fiscal year is from July 1 to August 31, and for the fiscal year just coming up--I'm just trying to get everything lined up and organized for it, so I'm very familiar with the numbers--we're targeting about a third of our total business as export, which in 1980 was maybe 2 or 3 percent. This year ('90-'91) a third of our business is going to be export as well, or maybe a little less--27 percent or something like that. So we've been making a major effort at getting into the export business solidly and successfully and profitably, and we're achieving that.

Our restaurant business [at the sparkling wine cellars] is growing to where the restaurant is now basically able to stand alone, as opposed to saying it is a marketing activity for the company. We have a successful restaurant business, and our tasting rooms, concert series, and all the retail things are pretty good stand-alone activities. We're actually now net sellers of grapes, as well; we're farmers as well as winemakers and have a very profitable farming activity that we're into. Then we have our U.S. Parrott & Co. sales operations.

Exports

Teiser: When did your exports start going up?

E. Wente: They have really gone up dramatically in the last three to four years, but I started working on exports in 1978 as a serious commitment of my time. I spent a long time building relationships and contacts around the world to get into a larger export position, and just in the last three or four years we're starting to see the results of that.

Teiser: Have you traveled a lot?

E. Wente: I have, and I continue to. We now have an export director, John Schwartz, who has been with us for two years and who travels a

lot, and we're hiring this summer an assistant export director who will probably travel a lot as well.

Teiser: Does Philip travel much?

E. Wente: Philip travels quite a bit. He's more involved in the U.S. sales operations.

Teiser: It's very effective, isn't it, having family people travel?

E. Wente: Yes, it's one of the most effective tools that we have in a lot of instances.

Teiser: I imagine you'll send Carolyn to Mars one day.

E. Wente: Yes, once they get the route finalized and have a good, reliable service, we'll be there. [laughter]

Teiser: Are the expenses of export much higher than selling in the domestic market?

E. Wente: No. At this point [telephone interruption] the travel is more expensive, for the most part, than in the U.S., although not all that much so. This last spring you could get a $458 round-trip ticket to London. If you were buying a full-on, coach-class ticket so you could change your mind about where you were going on the way to New York and back, and you didn't have the stay-over-the-weekend routine, it was $900. A London hotel isn't really any more expensive than a New York hotel. In certain respects it's more expensive on travel, but overall it's not all that much more expensive.

Our actual marketing costs per case right now are less in our export markets than they are in the U.S. markets. For us the U.S. market is more competitive than what we have to spend to achieve results, but at the same time the U.S. market is so much larger for us. In the export market we're just starting into all these countries where we do small volumes, and on a small volume you don't need the same amount of marketing support.

Teiser: Have you been in the government export program?

E. Wente: Yes, we've been in the government export program ever since it was started.

Teiser: Is that a help?

E. Wente: Yes, it is, very much so. It doesn't always line up with what you would like to spend money on; their rules and documentation requirements sometimes make it less than as effective as it could be. On the other hand, I can see that if you don't have some set of rules and some way to organize it and manage it, the opportunities to not use it correctly are also large, so there's always a trade-off.

Teiser: What are the main countries that you export to now?

E. Wente: We're in forty countries. The big markets for us, starting in Europe, are Switzerland, Sweden, U.K., Canada--Canada is our single biggest, but that's pretty much true for most people. In fact, U.S. and Canadian trade is so large anyway. Japan is a big market for us, and then there is just a whole host of smaller markets.

Teiser: You're going into Russia now?

E. Wente: Yes. We sell about [uses calculator] a hundred cases a month right now to Russia.

Teiser: What about the European Economic Community? Are you taking advantage of the future of--?

E. Wente: Nineteen ninety-two?

Teiser: Yes. Is that going to help?

E. Wente: I don't know that I have enough knowledge about all of the activities for '92.

##

E. Wente: To start with, I think the effective date is supposed to be January 1, 1993. It's not clear to me why they are calling it '92. My opinion from personal observations is that this 1992 is not going to have as big an impact as people are putting it up to have. I don't see how they're going to get everything in place in time. I think it's going to be a lot longer build-up than that in order to really do all the things that they're saying. I don't see, for example, Her Majesty's customs and excise totally giving over to the Community's customs and excise. I don't see how all the countries are going to immediately match up some of their import duties, get rid of them, collect more money in other places. The very nature of the banking discussions in terms of a central bank--are we all going to deal in ecus, or are we still going to have pounds and francs and lira and Deutschemarks?

Also, my personal opinion at this point is that the West Germans, if anybody can do it in terms of the reunification deal, are probably the most ideal candidates of any country in the world to undertake a project like that. But I'm not sure they have enough money to really do the job, and the fact that they're going to have turned so inward for quite some time is not, I think, going to make '92 go forward as rapidly as it might otherwise. All the pressures of Eastern Europe--I see lots of opportunities in Europe, but I don't see that there are going to be major benefits from this '92, nor do I see that there are going to be major hindrances. I think it's going to be more business as usual.

Teiser: Are there also lots of opportunities in the Pacific basin?

E. Wente: Yes. They present different sets of opportunities and different sets of problems. Europe has a much stronger wine-drinking history and culture and, right now, average per-capita consumption. So the education about wine itself isn't so great; it's mainly about California, about Wente Bros., and why we should have some of the business. In the Far East it's (1) getting wine in general to be a greater part of the culture, and (2) it's getting our share of (1). In Europe, (1) is already there.

It's more competitive in Europe in terms of everybody making their own wines, and they have hundreds if not thousands of years of commercial relationships about wine, and in the Far East that's not true. In the Far East, the United States, and California in particular, enjoys a very good image and reputation. Actually, worldwide, California--and San Francisco--enjoys a very good reputation and image. In the U.S., particularly the Midwest and the East, California doesn't enjoy the same type of strong, positive image, I don't think, and certainly in this day and age San Francisco is getting to be less and less a strong, positive image around the United States. When you say "San Francisco" when you are traveling someplace outside of the country, people's eyes light up, and they're excited about it. In the U.S., hopefully their eyes don't roll back in their heads. It's just not as strong an image.

There are a lot of opportunities in the Far East as countries begin to open up and they begin to be more successful. Thailand, for example--we're just starting to do pretty good business, and Thailand is just right now starting into an economic boom. South Korea is just starting to open up, and we're starting to do some pretty good business. Likewise in

Mexico, which has been closed for a long time, we're starting to do some business. There are lots of opportunities.

Arel Wente

Teiser: Let me talk about your wife, Arel. When did you marry her, and what has she been doing about wine?

E. Wente: June 30, 1973, we were married. I'm checking my watch; it's still three days until our anniversary. [laughs]

Teiser: What was her maiden name?

E. Wente: Sudduth.

Teiser: She has taken an active part in the winery?

E. Wente: She is very active in public relations activities. She's a very good speaker about wine and is very well received. She has had a lot of fun and some very good experiences in the different areas where she has had opportunities to speak. She basically speaks at all the local clubs, whether it's Rotary Club or you name it, if there is a request for someone from Wente Bros. to do that. She deals with the local cable TV station for a variety of things. She teaches a wine class at our sparkling wine cellar on a regular basis. She's been teaching wine classes also for the local community park and rec district classes and that type of thing. She's been a speaker for a number of cruise lines. She does a lot of things like the winemaker's dinner we had last night for Spottswoode at our restaurant, where she was the mistress of ceremonies. There are a lot of things that she is involved in.

Teiser: Did you meet her at Stanford?

E. Wente: Yes, I did. We met when we were freshmen at Stanford.

Wine Industry and Public Activities

Teiser: You yourself have worked with wine industry organizations. What have you done?

E. Wente: For ten years I was chairman of the health and social issues committee of Wine Institute. I've been a member of the board of directors of the Wine Institute at different times. I've participated in American Society for Enology and Viticulture (ASEV). I participated in different local organizations. One time I was fairly active in the Monterey Winegrowers' organization. At this point, personally I'm not, but ten years ago I was. I was active in the Livermore Valley Winegrowers at one point, and now Carolyn is active in Livermore and John Woolley, our public relations director, is active in Monterey. There are probably other things that aren't popping to mind.

Teiser: Are you involved in any other wine organizations?

E. Wente: I belong to the Knights of the Vine and things like that.

Teiser: Are those social organizations valuable?

E. Wente: They're good fun, and it's interesting to get other people's opinions and ideas on wines and to have a number of people tasting the same wine at once, offering comments on it, and to be exposed to something other than, you might say, home cooking.

Teiser: Do you ever call in people from outside to taste with you?

E. Wente: Occasionally. Typically we don't. By and large on the production side of it we're focusing on what we think we want our wines to taste like. What we will do a lot of times is have tastings of a number of other brands versus ours. Maybe we'll get other people in when we do a blind tasting like that and have a review of how everything has come out, take comments on it, and decide how we feel we're doing versus that.

Teiser: Do you get any feedback from your tasting room?

E. Wente: Yes. We get feedback on a whole lot of issues, whether it's wine quality, wine style, wine price, local politics, noise at harvest, "Can I help at harvest?" The various events, whether it's art in the vineyard, a harvest celebration, a fall tasting--we do a lot of different things.

Teiser: Yes, you have a lot of events, don't you? This is quite a change in the wine industry as a whole, isn't it?

E. Wente: I think there are several things. Let's take ourselves in particular: one, clearly you want to be visible and be in a position of a strong development for a brand name. Two, you want to be visible and an active part of your community, whether running local bicycle races or 10ks [foot races] or things like

that--things that give people enjoyment and ability to be out and active. Then in this day and age I think we need to take every opportunity to communicate the positive aspects of who we are and what we do. Basically, nobody else is going to do that.

Aims for the Future

Tieser: I have on my outline to ask you about the aims for the future of Wente Bros., but I think you have explained them pretty well.

E. Wente: Right now our aim for the future is that we want to be in the wine and grape farming businesses. We like what we do, and we want to be successful at it. We realize that there's going to wind up being a certain amount of flexibility. If we were talking again in ten years, what would our product line be and what would be the principal items on it? I'm not sure they would be the same ones they are today. Some of it is liable to change. There are going to be certain things that were there thirty years ago, that were there twenty years ago, that were there ten years ago, that are here today, and will be there in ten years.

Then we want to be top, top-quality winemakers. Those are our basic goals in life. After that we'll see how well we can succeed with them.

Teiser: Do you have future generations in mind? Are you able to look ahead with that?

E. Wente: That's a question of "never say ever or never." My wife and I have two kids, our daughter, Christine, who is fifteen, and our son, Karl, who is fourteen. Philip has two kids, a daughter, Jordan, and a daughter, Alicia. I guess Jordan's about five, and Alicia is one or two months old--very new. So you never say ever or never to what they're going to do until they're actually out of school and say, "Yes, I want to work here. I definitely want to do it. This is something I like doing as opposed to something I feel like you're making me do." There's probably no point in making somebody do something they don't want to do; you're not really going to be successful at it. Hopefully our kids will have an interest. They express an interest right now, but I don't think they really think about it so much as it's just a part of their life: this is what we do.

Teiser: You know from your experience that growing up in a wine family does have impact.

E. Wente: Yes. The good things about it are that if you are familiar with it and get a focus on it, it's not like, "What do I want to study in school? Then what am I going to do when I get out of school? Am I going to move to New York? I've always wanted to be a financier," or, "I've always wanted to run charter boats in the Seychelle Islands," or whatever it is.

Teiser: I should think you have a good statistical chance--.

E. Wente: At this point, one would hope, yes.

Teiser: You've spoken cogently, and I'm very grateful to you. This is an awfully well-rounded interview with the three of you and your mother; it certainly brings out the continuity.

Thank you very much.

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